

# A SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY OF POSTMODERNITY

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I propose that:

1. The term *postmodernity* renders accurately the defining traits of the social condition that emerged throughout the affluent countries of Europe and of European descent in the course of the 20th century, and took its present shape in the second half of that century. The term is accurate as it draws attention to the continuity and discontinuity as two faces of the intricate relationship between the present social condition and the formation that preceded it and gestated. It brings into relief the intimate, genetic bond that ties the new, post-modern social condition to *modernity*—the social formation that emerged in the same part of the world in the course of the 18th century, and took its final shape, later to be sedimented in the sociological models of modern society (or models of society created by modern sociology), during the 19th; while at the same time indicating the passing of a certain crucial characteristic in whose absence one cannot anymore adequately describe the social condition as modern in the sense given to the concept by the orthodox (modern) social theory.

2. Postmodernity may be interpreted as the fully developed modernity; as modernity that acknowledged the effects it was producing throughout its history, yet producing inadvertently, by default rather than design, as *unanticipated consequences*, by-products often perceived as waste; as modernity conscious of its true nature—*modernity for itself*. The most conspicuous features of the post-modern condition: institutionalized pluralism, variety, contingency and ambivalence—have been all turned out by the modern society in ever increasing volumes; yet they were produced, so to speak, “by the way”, at a time when the institutions of modernity, faithfully replicated by modern mentality, struggled for *universality, homogeneity, monotony* and *clarity*. Post-modern condition can be therefore described, on the one hand, as modernity emancipated from false consciousness; on the other, as a new type of social condition marked by the overt institutionalization of the characteristics which

modernity—in its designs and managerial practices—set about to eliminate and, failing that, tried to conceal.

3. The twin differences that set the postmodern condition apart from modern society are profound and seminal enough to justify (indeed, to call for) a separate sociological theory of postmodernity that would break decisively with the concepts and metaphors of the models of modernity and lift itself out of the mental frame in which they had been conceived. This need arises from the fact that (their notorious disagreements notwithstanding) the extant models of modernity articulated a shared vision of modern history as a *movement with a direction*—and differed solely in the selection of the ultimate destination or the organizing principle of the process, be it universalization, rationalization, or systemization. None of those principles can be upheld (at least not in the radical form typical of the orthodox social theory) in the light of postmodern experience. Neither can be sustained the very master-metaphor that underlies them: one of the process with a pointer.

4. Postmodernity is not a flawed variant of modernity; neither is it a diseased state of modernity, a temporary ailing yet to be rectified, a case of “modernity in crisis”. It is, instead, an essentially viable, pragmatically self-sustainable and logically self-contained social condition defined by *distinctive features of its own*. A theory of postmodernity cannot be therefore a modified theory of modernity, a theory of modernity with a set of negative markers. An adequate theory of postmodernity may be only constructed in a cognitive space organized by a different ensemble of assumptions and needs its own vocabulary. The degree of emancipation from the concepts and issues spawned by the discourse of modernity will be the measure of its adequacy.

#### CONDITIONS OF THEORETICAL EMANCIPATION

What the theory of postmodernity must discard in the first place is the assumption of a *systemic character* of the social condition it purports to model: the vision of a system (a) with a degree of cohesiveness, (b) equilibrated or marked by an overwhelming tendency to equilibration, (c) defining its elements in terms of the function they perform in that process of equilibration or the reproduction of the equilibrated state. It must assume instead that the social condition it intends to model is essentially and perpetually *unequilibrated*: composed of elements with a degree of autonomy large enough to justify the view of totality as a kaleidoscopic—momentary and contingent—outcome of interaction. The orderly, structured nature of totality cannot be taken for granted; nor can its pseudo-representational construction be seen as the purpose of theoretical activity. Randomness of the global outcome of uncoordinated activities cannot be treated as a departure from the pattern which the totality strives to maintain; any pattern that may temporarily emerge out of the random movements of autonomous agents is as haphazard and unmotivated

as the one that could emerge in its place or the one bound to replace it, if also for a time only. All order that can be found is a local, emergent and transitory phenomenon; its nature can be best grasped by a metaphor of a whirlpool appearing in the flow of a river, retaining its shape only for a relatively brief period and only at the expense of incessant metabolism and constant renewal of content.

The theory of postmodernity must be free of the last vestiges of the metaphor of progress that informed all competing theories of modern society. With the totality dissipated into a series of randomly emerging, shifting and evanescent islands of order, its temporal record cannot be linearly represented. Perpetual local transformations do not add up so as to prompt (much less to assure) in effect an increased homogeneity, rationality or organic systemness of the whole. Postmodern condition is a site of constant mobility and change, but no clear direction of development. The image of Brownian movement offers an apt metaphor for this aspect of postmodernity: each momentary state is neither a necessary effect of the preceding state nor the sufficient cause of the next one. Postmodern condition is both *undetermined* and *undetermining*. It “unbinds” time; weakens the constraining impact of the past and effectively prevents colonization of the future.

Similarly, the theory of postmodernity would do well if it disposed of concepts like *system* (or, for this matter, *society*), suggestive of a sovereign totality whose welfare or perpetuation all smaller (and, by definition, subordinate) units serve—and thus a totality entitled to define, and capable of defining, the meanings of individual actions and agencies that compose it. A sociology geared to the conditions of postmodernity ought to replace the category of *society* with that of *sociality*; a category that tries to convey the processual modality of social reality, the dialectical play of randomness and pattern (or, from the agent's point of view, of freedom and dependence); and a category that refuses to take the structured character of the process for granted—which treats instead all found structures as emergent accomplishments.

With their field of vision organized around the focal point of system-like, resourceful and meaning-bestowing totality, sociological theories of modernity (which conceived of themselves as sociological theories *tout court*) concentrated on the vehicles of homogenization and conflict-resolution in a relentless search for a solution to the “Hobbesian problem”. This cognitive perspective (shared with the one realistic referent of the concept of “society”—the national state, the only totality in history able to seriously entertain the ambition of contrived, artificially sustained and managed monotony and homogeneity) a priori disqualified all “uncertified” agency; unpatterned and unregulated spontaneity of the autonomous agent was pre-defined as a de-stabilizing and, indeed, anti-social factor marked for taming and extinction in the continuous struggle for societal survival. By the same token, prime importance was assigned to the mechanisms and weapons of order-promotion and pattern-maintenance:

the state and the legitimation of its authority, power, socialization, culture, ideology etc.—all selected for the role they played in the promotion of pattern, monotony, predictability and thus also manageability of conduct.

Sociological theory of postmodernity is bound to reverse the structure of the cognitive field. Focus must be now on agency; more correctly, on the *habitat* in which agency operates and which it produces in the course of operation. As it offers the agency the sum-total of resources for all possible action as well as the field inside which the action-orienting and action-oriented relevancies may be plotted, the habitat is the territory inside which both freedom and dependency of the agency are constituted (and, indeed, perceived as such). Unlike system-like totalities of modern social theory, habitat neither determines the conduct of the agents nor defines its meaning; it is no more (but no less either) than the setting in which both action and meaning-assignment are *possible*. Its own identity is as under-determined and motile, as emergent and transitory, as those of the actions and their meanings that form it.

There is one crucial area, though, in which the habitat performs a determining (systematizing, patterning) role: it sets the agenda for the “business of life” through supplying the inventory of ends and the pool of means. The way in which the ends and means are supplied determines as well the meaning of the “business of life”: the nature of the tasks all agencies confront and have to take up in one form or another. In as far as the ends are offered as potentially alluring rather than obligatory, and rely for their choice on their own seductiveness rather than supporting power of coercion, “business of life” splits into a series of choices. The series is not pre-structured, or is pre-structured only feebly and above all inconclusively. For this reason the choices through which the life of the agents is construed and sustained are best seen (as it tends to be seen by the agents themselves) as adding up to the process of *self-constitution*. To underline the graduated and ultimately inconclusive nature of the process, self-constitution is best viewed as *self-assembly*.

I propose that sociality, habitat, self-constitution and self-assembly should occupy in the sociological theory of postmodernity the central place that the orthodoxy of modern social theory had reserved for the categories of society, normative group (like class or community), socialization and control.

#### MAIN TENETS OF THE THEORY OF POSTMODERNITY

1. Under postmodern condition, habitat is a *complex system*. According to contemporary mathematics, complex systems differ from mechanical systems (those assumed by the orthodox, modern theory of society) in two crucial respects. First, they are unpredictable; second, they are not controlled by statistically significant factors (the circumstance demonstrated by the mathematical proof of the famous “butterfly effect”). The consequences of these two distinctive features of complex systems are truly revolutionary in relation to the

received wisdom of sociology. The “systemness” of the postmodern habitat does not lend itself anymore to the organismic metaphor, which means that agencies active within the habitat cannot be assessed in terms of functionality or dysfunctionality. The successive states of the habitat appear to be unmotivated and free from constraints of deterministic logic. And the most formidable research strategy modern sociology had developed—statistical analysis—is of no use in exploring the dynamics of social phenomena and evaluating the probabilities of their future development. Significance and numbers have parted ways. Statistically insignificant phenomena may prove to be decisive, and their decisive role cannot be grasped in advance.

2. Postmodern habitat is a complex (non-mechanical) system for two closely related reasons. First, there is no “goal setting” agency with overall managing and coordinating capacities or ambitions—one whose presence would provide a vantage point from which the aggregate of effective agents appears as a “totality” with a determined structure of relevances; a totality which one can think of as an *organization*. Second—the habitat is populated by a great number of agencies, most of them single-purpose, some of them small, some big, but none large enough to subsume or otherwise determine behaviour of the others. Focusing on a single purpose considerably enhances the effectivity of each agency in the field of its own operation, but prevents each area of the habitat from being controlled from a single source, as the field of operation of any agency never exhausts the whole area the action is affecting. Operating in different fields yet zeroing on shared areas, agencies are *partly* dependent on each other, but the lines of dependence cannot be fixed and thus their actions (and consequences) remain staunchly under-determined, that is autonomous.

3. Autonomy means that agents are only partly, if at all, constrained in their pursuit of whatever they have institutionalized as their purpose. To a large extent, they are free to pursue the purpose to the best of their mastery over resources and managerial capacity. They are free (and tend) to view the rest of the habitat shared with other agents as a collection of opportunities and “problems” to be resolved or removed. Opportunity is what increases the output in the pursuit of purpose; a problem is what threatens the decrease or a halt of production. In ideal circumstances (maximization of opportunities and minimization of problems) each agent would tend to go in the pursuit of purpose as far as the resources allow; the availability of resources is the only reason for action they need and thus the sufficient guarantee of the action’s reasonability. The possible impact on other agents’ opportunities is not automatically reformed into the limitation of the agent’s own output. The many products of purpose-pursuing activities of numerous partly interdependent but relatively autonomous agents must yet find, *ex post facto*, their relevance, utility and demand-securing attractiveness. The products are bound to be created in volumes exceeding the pre-existing demand motivated by already

articulated problems. They are still to seek their place and meaning as well as the problems that they may claim to be able to resolve.

4. For every agency, the habitat in which its action is inscribed appears therefore strikingly different from the confined space of its own automatic, purpose-subordinated pursuits. It appears as a space of chaos and chronic *indeterminacy*, a territory subjected to rival and contradictory meaning-bestowing claims and hence perpetually *ambivalent*. All states the habitat may assume appear equally *contingent* (that is, they have no overwhelming reasons for being what they are, and they could be different if any of the participating agencies behave differently). Heuristics of pragmatically useful “next moves” displaces therefore the search for algorithmic, certain knowledge of deterministic chains. The succession of states assumed by the relevant areas of the habitat no agency can interpret without including its own actions in the explanation; agencies cannot meaningfully scan the situation “objectively”, that is in such ways as allow to eliminate, or bracket away, their own activity.

5. The existential modality of the agents is therefore one of insufficient determination, inconclusiveness, motility and rootlessness. Identity of the agent is neither given nor authoritatively confirmed. It has to be construed, yet no design for the construction can be taken as prescribed or foolproof. It lacks a benchmark against which its progress could be measured, and so it cannot be meaningfully described as “progressing”. It is now the incessant (and non-linear) activity of *self-constitution* that makes the identity of the agent. In other words, the self-organization of the agents in terms of a “life-project” (a concept that assumes a long-term stability; a lasting identity of the habitat, in its direction transcending, or at least commensurate with, the longevity of human life) is displaced by the process of self-constitution. Unlike the “life-project”, self-constitution has no destination point in reference to which it could be evaluated and monitored. It has no visible end; not even a stable direction. It is conducted inside a shifting (and, as we have seen before, unpredictable) constellation of mutually autonomous points of reference, and thus purposes guiding the self-constitution at one stage may soon lose their current authoritatively confirmed validity. Hence the self-assembly of the agency is not a cumulative process; self-constitution entails disassembling alongside the assembling, adoption of new elements as much as shedding of others, learning together with forgetting. The identity of the agency, much as it remains in a state of permanent change, cannot be therefore described as “developing”. In the self-constitution of the agencies, the “Brownian movement”-type spatial nature of the habitat is projected onto the time axis.

6. The only visibility of continuity and cumulative effects of the self-constitution efforts is offered by the human body—seen as the only constant factor among the protean and fickle identities. Hence the centrality of *body-cultivation* among the self-assembly concerns, and the acute attention devoted to everything “taken internally” (food, air, drugs, etc.), and everything

coming in touch with the skin—that interface between the agent and the rest of the habitat and the hotly contested frontier of agent's autonomously managed identity. In the postmodern habitat, DIY operations (jogging, dieting, slimming etc.) replace and to a large extent displace the panoptical drill of modern factory, school or the barracks; unlike their predecessors, however, they are not perceived as externally imposed, cumbersome and resented necessities, but as manifestoes of the agent's freedom. Their heteronomy, once blatant through coercion, now hides behind seduction.

7. The process of self-constitution is devoid of the advance design and thus generates an acute demand for a substitute: orientation points that may guide successive moves. It is the other agencies (real or imagined) of the habitat who serve as such orientation points. Their impact on the process of self-constitution differs from that exercised by normative groups in that on the whole they neither monitor or knowingly administer the acts of allegiance and the actions that follow it. From the vantage point of self-constituting agents, other agents can be metaphorically visualized as a randomly scattered set of free-standing and unguarded totemic poles which one can approach or abandon without applying for permission to enter or leave. The self-proclaimed allegiance to the selected agent (the act of selection itself) is accomplished through the adoption of *symbolic tokens* of belonging, and the freedom of choice is limitedly solely by the availability and accessibility of such tokens.

8. *Availability* of tokens for potential self-assembly depends on their *visibility*, much as it does on their material presence. Visibility in its turn depends on the perceived *utility* of symbolic tokens for the satisfactory outcome of self-construction; that is, on their ability to reassure the agent that the current results of self-assembly are indeed satisfactory. This reassurance is the substitute for the absent certainty, much as the orientation points with the attached symbolic tokens are collectively a substitute for pre-determined patterns for life-projects. The reassuring capacity of symbolic tokens rests on borrowed (ceded) authority: of *expertise*, or of *mass following*. Symbolic tokens are actively sought and adopted if their relevance is vouched for by the trusted authority of the expert, or by their previous or concurrent appropriation by a great number of other agents. These two variants of authority are in their turn fed by the insatiable thirst of the self-constituting agents for reassurance. Thus *freedom* of choice and *dependence* on external agents reinforce each other, and arise and grow together as products of the same process of self-assembly and of the constant demand for reliable orientation points which it cannot but generate.

9. *Accessibility* of tokens for self-assembly varies from agent to agent, depending mostly on the resources that a given agent commands. Increasingly the most strategic role among the resources is played by knowledge; the growth of individually appropriated knowledge widens the range of assembly patterns which can be realistically chosen. Freedom of the agent, measured by the range of realistic choices, turns under postmodern condition

into the main dimension of inequality and thus becomes the main stake of the *re-distributional* type of conflict that tends to arise from the dichotomy of privilege and deprivation; by the same token, access to knowledge—being the key to an extended freedom—turns into the major index of social standing. This circumstance lifts the attractiveness of *information* among the symbolic tokens sought after for their reassuring potential. It also further enhances the authority of experts, trusted to be the repositories and sources of valid knowledge. Information becomes a major resource, and experts the crucial brokers of all self-advancement.

### POSTMODERN POLITICS

Modern social theory could afford to separate theory from policy. Indeed, it made a virtue out of that historically circumscribed plausibility. Keeping the separation watertight has turned into a most distinctive mark of modern theory of society. A theory of postmodernity cannot follow the pattern. Once the essential contingency and the absence of supra- or pre-agentic foundations of sociality and of the structured forms it sediments have been acknowledged, it becomes clear that the politics of agents lies at the core of the habitat's existence; indeed, it can be said to be its existential modality. All description of the postmodern habitat must include politics from the beginning. Politics cannot be kept outside the basic theoretical model as an epiphenomenon, a super-structural reflection or belatedly formed, intellectually processed derivative.

It could be argued (though the argument cannot be spelled out here) that the separation of theory and policy in modern *theory* could be sustained as long as there was, unchallenged or effectively immunized against challenge, *practical* division between theoretical and political practice. The latter separation had its foundation in the activity of the modern national state, arguably the only social formation in history with pretensions and ambitions of the administration of a global order, and of a total monopoly, and the procedure of its formulation had to be made separate and independent from the procedure legitimizing an acceptable theory and, more generally, intellectual work modelled after the latter procedure. The gradual, yet relentless erosion of national state's monopoly (undermined simultaneously from above and from below, by trans-national and sub-national agencies, and weakened by the fissures in the historical marriage between nationalism and the state, none needing the other very strongly in their mature form) ended the plausibility of theoretical segregation.

With the state's resourcefulness and ambitions shrinking, responsibility (real or just claimed) for policy shifts away from the state or is actively shed on the state's own initiative. It is not taken over by another agent, though. It dissipates; it splits into a plethora of localized or partial policies pursued by localized or partial (mostly one issue) agencies. With that vanishes the modern state's tendency to precipitate and draw upon itself almost all social protest



arising from unsatisfied redistributive demands and expectations—a quality that further enhanced the exclusive role of the state among societal agencies, at the same time rendering it vulnerable and exposed to frequent political crises (as conflicts fast turned into political protests). Under the postmodern condition grievances which in the past would cumulate into a collective political process and address themselves to the state, stay diffuse and translate into self-reflexivity of the agents, stimulating further dissipation of policies and the autonomy of postmodern agencies (if they do cumulate for a time in the form of a one-issue pressure group, they bring together agents too heterogeneous in other respects to prevent the dissolution of the formation once the desired progress in the issue in question has been achieved; and even before that final outcome, the formation is unable to override the diversity of its supporters' interests and thus claim and secure their *total* allegiance and identification). One can speak, allegorically, of the “functionality of dissatisfaction” in a postmodern habitat.

Not all politics in postmodernity is unambiguously postmodern. Throughout the modern era, politics of *inequality* and hence of *redistribution* was by far the most dominant type of political conflict and conflict-management. With the advent of postmodernity it has lost its dominant role, but remains (and in all probability will remain) a constant feature of the postmodern habitat. Even such an eminently modern type of politics acquires in many cases a postmodern tinge, though. Redistributive vindications of our time are aimed more often than not at the winning of *human rights* (a code name for the agent's autonomy, for that freedom of choice that constitutes the agency in the postmodern habitat) by categories of population heretofore denied them (this is the case of the emancipatory movements of oppressed ethnic minorities, of the black movement, of one important aspect of the feminist movement), rather than at the express re-distribution of wealth, income and other consumable values by the society at large.

Alongside the survivals of the modern form of politics, however, specifically postmodern forms appear and gradually colonize the centrefield of the postmodern political process. Some of them are new; some others owe their new, distinctly postmodern quality to their recent expansion and greatly increased impact. The following are the most prominent among them (the named forms are not necessarily mutually exclusive; and some act at cross-purposes):

1. *Tribal politics*. This is a generic name for practices aimed at collectivization (supra-agentic conformation) of the agents' self-constructing efforts. Tribal politics entails the creation of tribes as *imagined communities*. Unlike the pre-modern communities the modern powers set about to uproot, postmodern tribes exist in no other form but the symbolically manifested commitment of their members. They can rely on neither executive powers able

to coerce their constituency into submission to the tribal rules (seldom do they have clearly codified rules to which the submission could be demanded), nor on the strength of neighbourly bonds or intensity of reciprocal exchange (most tribes are de-territorialized, and communication between their members is hardly at any time more intense than the intercourse between members and non-members of the tribe). Postmodern tribes are, therefore, constantly in *statu nascendi* rather than *essendi*, brought over again into being by repetitive symbolic rituals of the members but persisting no longer than these rituals' power of attraction (in which sense they are akin to Kant's *aesthetic communities* or Schmalenbach's *communions*). Allegiance is composed of the ritually manifested support for positive tribal tokens or equally symbolically demonstrated animosity to negative (anti-tribal) tokens. As the persistence of tribes relies solely on the deployment of the affective allegiance, one would expect an unprecedented condensation and intensity of emotive behaviour and a tendency to render the rituals as spectacular as possible—mainly through inflating their shocking power. Tribal rituals, as it were, compete for the scarce resource of public attention as the major (perhaps sole) resource of survival.

2. *Politics of desire.* This entails actions aimed at establishing the relevance of certain types of conduct (tribal tokens) for the self-constitution of the agents. If the relevance is established, the promoted conduct grows in attractiveness, its declared purposes acquire *seductive* power, and the probability of their choice and active pursuit increases: promoted purposes turn into agents' needs. In the field of the politics of desire, agencies vie with each other for the scarce resource of individual and collective dreams of the good life. The overall effect of the politics of desire is heteronomy of choice supported by, and in its turn sustaining, the autonomy of the choosing agents.

3. *Politics of fear.* This is, in a sense, a supplement (simultaneously a complement and a counterweight) of the politics of desire, aimed at drawing boundaries to heteronomy and staving off its potentially harmful effects. If the typical modern fears were related to the threat of totalitarianism perpetually ensconced in the project of rationalized and state-managed society (Orwell's "boot eternally trampling a human face", Weber's "cog in the machine" and "iron cage" etc.), postmodern fears arise from uncertainty as to the soundness and reliability of advice offered through the politics of desire. More often than not, diffuse fears crystallize in the form of a suspicion that the agencies promoting desire are (for the sake of self-interest) oblivious or negligent of the damaging effects of their proposals. In view of the centrality of body-cultivation in the activity of self-constitution, the damage most feared is one that can result in poisoning or maiming the body through penetration or contact with the skin (the most massive panics have focused recently on incidents like mad cow's disease, listeria in eggs, shrimps fed on poisonous algae, dumping of toxic waste—with the intensity of fear correlated to the importance of the body among the self-constituting concerns, rather than to the statistical significance of

the event and extent of the damage). Politics of fear strengthens the position of experts in the processes of self-constitution, while ostensibly questioning their competence. Each successive instance of the suspension of trust articulates a new area of the habitat as problematic and thus leads to a call for more experts and more expertise.

4. *Politics of certainty.* This entails the vehement search for social confirmation of choice, in the face of the irredeemable pluralism of the patterns on offer and acute awareness that each formula of self-constitution, however carefully selected and tightly embraced, is ultimately one of the many, and always “until further notice”. Production and distribution of certainty is the defining function and the source of power of the experts. As the pronouncements of the experts can seldom be put to the test by the recipients of their services, for most agents the certainty about the soundness of their choices can be plausibly entertained only in the form of *trust*. Politics of certainty consists therefore mainly in the production and manipulation of trust; conversely, “lying”, “letting down”, betrayal of trust, abuse of privileged information emerge as the major threat to the already precarious and vulnerable self-identity of postmodern agents. Trustworthiness, credibility and perceived sincerity become major criteria by which merchants of certainty—experts, politicians, sellers of self-assembly identity kits—are judged, approved or rejected.

#### POSTMODERN ETHICS

Similarly to politics, ethics is an indispensable part of sociological theory of postmodernity pretending to any degree of completeness. Description of modern society could leave ethical problems aside or ascribe to them but a marginal place, in view of the fact that moral regulation of conduct was to a large extent subsumed under legislative and law-enforcing activity of global societal institutions, while whatever remained unregulated in such a way was “privatized” or perceived (and treated) as residual and marked for extinction in the course of full modernization. This condition does not hold anymore, ethical discourse is not institutionally preempted and hence its conduct and resolution (or irresolution) must be an organic part of any theoretical model of postmodernity.

Again, not all ethical issues found in a postmodern habitat are new. Most importantly, the possibly extemporal issues of the orthodox ethics—the rules binding short-distance, face-to-face intercourse between moral agents under conditions of physical and moral proximity—remain presently as much alive and poignant as ever before. In no way are they postmodern; as a matter of fact, they are not modern either. (On the whole, modernity contributed little, if anything, to the enrichment of moral problematics. Its role boiled down to the substitution of legal for moral regulation and the exemption of a wide and growing sectors of human actions from moral evaluation.)

The distinctly postmodern ethical problematics arises primarily from two crucial features of the postmodern condition: *pluralism* of authority, and the centrality of *choice* in the self-constitution of postmodern agents.

1. Pluralism of authority, or rather the absence of an authority with globalizing ambitions, has a twofold effect. First, it rules out the setting of binding norms each agency must (or could be reasonably expected to) obey. Agencies may be guided by their own purposes, paying in principle as little attention to other factors (also to the interests of other agencies) as they can afford, given their resources and degree of independence. "Non-contractual bases of contract", devoid of institutional power support, are thereby considerably weakened. If unmotivated by the limits of the agency's own resources, any constraint upon the agency's action has to be negotiated afresh. Rules emerge mostly as reactions to strife and consequences of ensuing negotiations; still, the already negotiated rules remain by and large precarious and under-determined, while the needs of new rules—to regulate previously unanticipated contentious issues—keep proliferating. This is why the *problem* of rules stays in the focus of public agenda and is unlikely to be conclusively resolved. In the absence of "principle coordination" the negotiating of rules assumes a distinctly *ethical* character: at stake are the principles of non-utilitarian self-constraint of autonomous agencies—and both non-utility and autonomy define *moral* action as distinct from either self-interested or legally prescribed conduct. Second, pluralism of authorities is conducive to the resumption by the agents of moral responsibility that tended to be neutralized, rescinded or ceded away as long as the agencies remained subordinated to a unified, quasi-monopolistic legislating authority. On the one hand, the agents face now point-blank the consequences of their actions. On the other, they face the evident ambiguity and controversy of the purposes to which actions were to serve, and thus the need to justify argumentatively the values that inform their activity. Purposes can be no more substantiated *monologically*; having become perforce subjects of a *dialogue*, they must now refer to principles wide enough to command authority of the sort that belongs solely to ethical values.

2. The enhanced autonomy of the agent has similarly a twofold ethical consequence. First—in as far as the centre of gravity shifts decisively from heteronomous control to self-determination, and autonomy turns into the defining trait of postmodern agents—self-monitoring, self-reflection and self-evaluation become principal activities of the agents, indeed the mechanisms synonymous with their self-constitution. In the absence of a universal model for self-improvement, or of a clear-cut hierarchy of models, the most excruciating choices agents face are between life-purposes and values, not between the means serving the already set, uncontroversial ends. Supra-individual criteria of propriety in the form of technical precepts of instrumental rationality do not suffice. This circumstance, again, is potentially propitious to the sharpening up

of moral self-awareness: only ethical principles may offer such criteria of value-assessment and value-choice as are at the same time supra-individual (carry on authority admittedly superior to that of individual self-preservation), and fit to be used without surrendering the agent's autonomy. Hence the typically post-modern heightened interest in ethical debate and increased attractiveness of the agencies claiming expertise in moral values (e.g. the revival of religious and quasi-religious movements). Second, with the autonomy of all and any agents accepted as a principle and institutionalized in the life-process composed of an unending series of choices, the limits of the agent whose autonomy is to be observed and preserved turn into a most closely guarded and hotly contested frontier. Along this borderline new issues arise which can be settled only through an ethical debate. Is the flow and the outcome of self-constitution to be tested before the agent's right to autonomy is confirmed? If so, what are the standards by which success or failure are to be judged (what about the autonomy of young and still younger children, of the indigent, of parents raising their children in unusual ways, of people choosing bizarre life-styles, of people indulging in abnormal means of intoxication, people engaging in idiosyncratic sexual activities, individuals pronounced mentally handicapped)? And—how far the autonomous powers of the agent extend and at which point their limit is to be drawn (remember the notoriously inconclusive context between “life” and “choice” principles in the abortion debate).

All in all, in the postmodern context agents are constantly faced with moral issues and obliged to choose between equally well founded (or equally unfounded) ethical precepts. The choice always means the assumption of responsibility, and for this reason bears the character of a moral act. Under postmodern condition, the agent is perforce not just an actor and decision-maker, but a *moral subject*. The performance of life-functions demands also that the agent be a morally *competent* subject.

### SOCIOLOGY IN THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT

Strategies of any systematic study are bound to be resonant with the conception of its object. The orthodox sociology was resonant with the theoretical model of the modern society. It was for that reason that the proper accounting for the self-reflexive propensities of human actors proved to be so spectacularly difficult. Deliberately or against its declared wishes, sociology tended to marginalize or explain away self-reflexivity as rule-following, function-performing or at best sedimentation of institutionalized learning; in each case, as epiphenomenon of social totality, understood ultimately as “legitimate authority” capable of “principally coordinating” social space. As long as the self-reflexivity of actors remained reduced to the subjective perception of obedience to impersonal rules, it did not need to be treated seriously; it

rarely came under scrutiny as an independent variable, much less as a principal condition of all sociality and its institutionalized sedimentations.

Never flawless, this strategy becomes singularly inadequate under postmodern condition. Postmodern habitat is indeed an incessant flow of reflexivity; sociality responsible for all its structured yet fugitive forms, their interaction and their succession, is a discursive activity, activity of interpretation and re-interpretation, of interpretation fed back into the interpreted condition only to trigger off further interpretative efforts. To be effectively and consequentially present in a postmodern habitat sociology must conceive of itself as participant (perhaps better informed, more systematic, more rule-conscious, yet nevertheless a participant) of this never ending, self-reflexive process of reinterpretation—and devise its strategy accordingly. In practice, this will mean in all probability replacing the ambitions of the judge of “common beliefs”, healer of prejudices and umpire of truth with those of a clarifier of interpretative rules and facilitator of communication; this will amount to the replacement of the dream of the legislator with the practice of an interpreter.

### Notes

The ideas sketched in this article have been inspired or stimulated by readings and debates far too numerous for all the intellectual debts to be listed. And yet some, the most generous (even when unknowing) creditors must be named. They are: Benedict Anderson, Mikhail Bakhtin, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Agnes Heller, Michel Maffesoli, Stefan Moravski, Alain Touraine. And, of course, Georg Simmel, who started it all.