The Changing Status of Social Theory

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Abstract: This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive critical overview of the changing status of social theory, with a special emphasis upon the profound effects of postmodernism and poststructuralism. The presentation and analysis here is thus conceived not only in terms of significant historical issues, but mostly in terms of critically exploring the specific sociological reasons that contributed to the “crisis” as well as the “return” of social theory. On the one hand, social theory is seen as confronting the serious challenges of “linguistic turn”, “social constructionism”, “knowledge/power”, and “contested knowledge”. On the other hand, social theory optimistically faces the healthy possibility of a radical renewal, through its reflexive and dialogical sensitization.

Key words: Social Theory, Culture, Knowledge, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism

INTRODUCTION

Social theory involves ideas about social structures and phenomena, as well as about how human beings (should) re-organize their everyday relations, their cultural arrangements, and their political life. But these are also ideas whose background origins can be seen as embedded in a series of theoretical and philosophical arguments about:

- the mutual and synergetic relationships between people and institutions, between the individual and society;
- the various benefits, risks and dangers of the modern era;
- the nature, character and content of freedom, autonomy, self-realization and human fulfilment;
- and the path towards the good life (Greek, eu zein) and societal progress and emancipation.

Social theory has always occupied a central position within the heterogeneous field of the human and social sciences – that is, within the sciences systematically concerned with cultural and social phenomena. However, the role played by social theory, as Zygmunt Bauman perceptivey observes, has been significantly changed after the postmodern objections of its traditional and established (legislative) function.

Social theory, as well as the human and social sciences, have subsequently felt the strong need to radically reinvigorate their critical work and vision by carefully taking up the serious challenge of postmodern theory. This redefined the hotly debated relation between general theorizing and empirical contextualizations, as well as between political intentions and practices in the human and social sciences.

The Postmodern-poststructural Tradition: Postmodernism interrogated and denied the positivistic social theoretical task of data-explanation (as synthesis of empirical knowledge), the traditional epistemological attempts to definitely justify social-scientific knowledge (philosophical grounding), as well as the development of any “grand narrative” or “meta-narrative” (Jean-Francois Lyotard) – that is, any coherent moral-political vision of contributing to social change and human emancipation (critical social science and theory).

This interrogation has been very effective and influential in social science and theory through poststructuralism, a radical movement in the human and social sciences which actively emphasizes the “linguistic mediation” of any experience or observation (Derrida, Laclau, Luhmann), the “social basis of knowledge” (Ashmore/Woolgar), the overwhelming implications ofpower in “agonistic” knowledge-production (Foucault), as well as the essentially contested “nature” of the supposedly impersonal, universal and neutral scientific knowledge[1].

Poststructuralism has ultimately inspired a somewhat “performativist” or “enactivist” conception of social order, according to which social structures, relations, patterns, connections and identities are “textual” or “discursive” properties that exist only partially, because they are continuously “at stake” in linguistic attempts to render them a little bigger or a

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little smaller. We are all in the permanent business of re-negotiating, re-constructing and acting performatively upon them. Therefore, we all contribute to the “reality status” of what is described and explained. Both postmodernism and poststructuralism are thus diametrically opposed to all three basic constitutive characteristics of the Enlightenment conception of human and social science. They are:

**Anti-positivist and Anti-rationalist:** There is no “strong science” or “strong theory”, as expressed by the apolitical positivist/rationalist idea that “knowledge, in order to be interesting or creatively new, must be relatively context-free, must be able to rise above and transgress its primary situatedness”\(^\text{[2]}\).

**Anti-essentialist and Anti-objectivist:** Holistic theories and explanatory frameworks are ideologically loaded and fragile constructions which turn into “black boxes” or “essences” or “things” (reification) what is actually fluid, contextual and historically contingent.

**Anti-evolutionist and Anti-progressivist:** There is no necessity to “universalize” and therefore ideologically legitimize and rhetorically shield our own context-bound practices by posing them at the highest stage of supposedly impersonal evolutionary accounts of progress. Anti-evolutionism openly promotes and celebrates “rationalities rather than Rationality” (Michel Foucault).

**Anti-normativist and Anti-utopianist:** there is no necessity (or possibility) to maintain a universal utopian morality or an articulated normative position. Any such position, as Friedrich Nietzsche has demonstrated, is completely useless and potentially harmful. However, critical intuitions remain unjustified here (thus leaving unanswered why certain social arrangements are worse than others and rendering knowledge potentially solipsistic and relativistic).

In general, poststructuralism is not just the mere systematic application of qualitative interpretive methodologies (e.g. discourse analysis) to the vast field of all social, cultural and even natural phenomena, but a highly complex methodological and theoretical standpoint from which four central tenets can be analytically implied: the “linguistic turn”, social constructionism, regimes of “knowledge/power” (pouvoir/savoir), and the ideal of “contested” or “negotiated” knowledge.

**The Linguistic Turn:** There is no possibility to cognitively access any privileged and hegemonic form of totality, “real meaning” or “absolute truth”, since human experience and understanding necessarily depend on their symbolic mediation, “theoretical ladenness” (Popper, Kuhn, Goodman) and semiotic structuring. Thus, no distinction can be actually made between knowledge and action. Knowing and acting are one and the same\(^\text{[3]}\). Meaning is inescapably “contextual” (Volosinov, late Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Derrida) and “indeterminate” (Wittgenstein, Quine). Ultimately, the Eurocentric totalizing view from “nowhere” (or “everywhere”) is forever impossible. There is no universal, disinterested or “innocent knowledge” (Jane Flax). In other words, perspectivism is always inescapable. Our reflexive analytic focus therefore turns on “who needs truth?”\(^\text{[4]}\). That is the only actually important “critical question” here.

**Social Constructionism:** Everyday linguistic “knowledge practices” are intimately intertwined and embedded in “human relationships” and our “social togetherness” (Kenneth Gergen). The significance of events and actions is thus conceived in terms of broader structural and institutional patterns, which in turn inform people’s understanding of individual events. This is a dialectical-circular process in which “each level is taken to account for, to derive from, or to elaborate on the other: instances are explained by patterns and patterns by instances. There is no way out of this circle: it is what all of us make do with in our everyday lives\(^\text{[5]}\).

In this respect, *both* humans and non-humans are not theoretically understood in terms of “eternal Forms” (Plato), “natural kinds” or “essences”, but as contingent “social constructions”. Since the political is no longer regarded as pertaining to the extra-scientific realm (Bruno Latour), science becomes viscerally re-politicized and “knowledge politics” is brought right at the heart of the very construction of scientific statements in order to critically demask the old grand certainties of emancipation. But the knowledge-political insistence on a strict de-politicizing principle of “symmetry” (Actor-Network Theory) has overwhelmingly bred various forms of relativism, agnosticism and descriptivism, which are close to the current “fascination for a-morality”\(^\text{[6]}\).

**Regimes of Knowledge/Power:** As Michel Foucault has intriguingly shown in his “Discipline and Punish” and “History of Sexuality I”, knowledge (including scientific knowledge), which is both symbolically mediated and socially situated, cannot be separated from power. Truth, scientific reasoning and meaning are intrinsically interlinked with highly pervasive, diffused and omnipresent social power relations and practical activities. According to the (heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche) Foucauldian genealogical challenge to conventional morality and the standard
conceptions in humanist philosophy and social-political theory, the irredutionist principle of “knowledge politics” could help us break the dominant binary codes and realize the inherent powers and dangers of truth-seeking as well as the “prodigious machinery of the will to truth, with its vocation of exclusion”[17]. This strand of thought is also present in post-colonial studies (e.g. Ella Shohat, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said), cultural studies, gender studies, feminism and queer theory.

The Ideal of Contested Knowledge: Science as a vast plurality of practical activities which are fragmented and dispersed across a plethora of disciplinary frameworks, paradigms, research frontiers and perspectives has come to be re-considered as just one “culture of rationality” among others, or “just another story”, one among a huge plurality of approaches, digital information bases and virtual interpretive communities, “none of which can lay claim to a totalizing, overarching, or foundational status”[19]. Knowledge should never be thought as universally applicable, stable and secure; instead, it is now seen as permanently and dynamically re-negotiated and re-constituted[20].

This on-going struggle over “truth” and “representation” (Foucault, Gramsci, Bakhtin, Hall) has eventually resulted in an irreversible “socialization of knowledge” (social epistemology), the proliferation and spread of “indigenous”, “rebellious” and “subversive” knowledges (in plural), as well as in a series of knowledge-political issues, such as freedom of access to information, funding and democratization of scientific research, inclusion and participation of subjects in research, public accountability and new forms of action[21].

The Return of Social Theory: All these four tenets implicitly or explicitly deconstruct whatever goes beyond the concrete lived personal experiences and subjective interpretations of situated agents, and introduces concepts and theories entirely foreign or independent to the agent’s self-consciousness and self-understanding. The contemporary acute crisis of (Western) social theory is further intensified by its trivialization, academicization, fragmentation and “loss of autonomy” (Nicos Mouzelis).

Social theory thus needs “new directions and new perspectives” (Douglas Kellner) and, above all, a new sense of critical self-reflexivity. In other words, it should critically reflect upon its own normative dis-orientation and value vocabulary, its own history and potentialities, where it has been and where it is going. This moves the centre of our analytic gravity towards the three main stages that characterize the changing status of social theory:

The “Death” of the Subject: During the 1960’s, the allegedly autonomous, unified and universal “knowing subject” (Descartes, Kant, Sartre, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Althusser) of the theoretically grounded human and social sciences is radically deconstructed and rejected. On the basis of the linguistic turn, this rejection becomes overwhelmingly effective and allows for the total loss of logical ground of a general social theory (or “grand social theory”), as well as for the contextual and historically concrete emergence of the “libidinal self” (as opposed to the “rational ego”), new particularistic moral ideas, free-floating emotions and relative cultural corpuses. From this viewpoint, the agent is a de-centralized moral subject, rather than a rational decision-maker. However, the possibility of new theory (without universal structures) is not completely denied here.

The “Revival” of the Subject: During the 1970’s and the 1980’s, the Subject triumphally returns as a concrete agent, under the light of several historical movements and events following the French “near-revolution” of May 1968 and the worldwide student revolt (feminism, gay and lesbian struggles, etc.). These significant historical developments have substantially contributed to the dynamic politicization of poststructuralism and classical cultural theory, as well as to the emergence of new, more contextual and practical (ethical rather than moral) approaches within the rapidly expanding field of humanities. In addition, British Cultural Studies (or the so-called Birmingham School) pushed further toward a new concept of social agency.

The Renewal of Social Theory: Increasingly, the logic of a general explanatory social theory regains lost ground. Despite the generalized dissatisfaction with the problematic modern state of social theory (coupled with the obvious “untenability” of various forms of alternative society), its scope and potential have not come to an end. Alternative diagnoses, explanations and remedies are still possible. Social theory is far from being exhausted. Instead, it has undergone various instances of stagnation and embarrassment, where the old “it could be otherwise” vision (Charles Wright Mills) lost its initial impetus.

We thus have to carefully move towards a radical expansion of this liberal intellectual vision, to see “beyond the end of our noses”, and to seriously assess the likelihood of social change and emancipatory social scenarios. In the context of a new reflexive “sociological imagination” (Charles Wright Mills), social theory is openly re-transformed into a form of universal historical self-consciousness. Since the 1990s, new convincing positions and arguments for the necessity to substantially review, reconstruct and
reinvigorate general social theory have been clearly formulated:

- In the spirit of Leslie White’s cultureology, there are always (invisible) social and cultural networks, structures and processes which regularly escape from our hermeneutical horizon, intuitive perspective and immediate empirical attention. Because of their irreducible complexity and trans-individual/inter-subjective status, these virtual entities, or “virtualities”, require a sort of theoretical elaboration and modelling to be efficiently captured. Both the feminist conceptions of “gender” and “performativity”, Roy Bhaskar’s “generative mechanisms”, Pierre Bourdieu’s “habitus”, or Zygmunt Bauman’s “habitat”, intimately involve the famous agency-structure (or micro-macro) debate within the social and human sciences, which directly stems from this requirement.

- Contemporary sociocultural phenomena (such as, globalization, technological change and the digital divide, cultural diversity or multiculturalism) ultimately demand “deeper” explanations and “systematic” theoretical perspectives that go beyond the “here and now”. These context-transcending perspectives are absolutely necessary to fully understand and comprehensively criticize the complex involvement of particular cultural and historical (generative) mechanisms, which are usually “behind” global developments. General social theories are also necessary to open up shared spheres of “public debate” (Alvin Gouldner).

- Current issues of active agency and reflexive subjectivity (and subject-constitution), as exposed to the new exciting fields of media and mediation studies, primarily require radical and imaginative interdisciplinary approaches, which would be able to adequately interconnect the critical study of hidden symbolic processes to the phenomenological study of everyday social practices and meaning-making activities.

As Pierre Bourdieu has comprehensively concluded, social theory has to dialectically combine its interpretive and explanatory force with the reflexive agent’s subjective everyday perspective. This prevents us from naively reducing the agent to a “cultural dope” (Harold Garfinkel), a passive bearer of structural properties and social systemic imperatives.

We also have to be critically aware of our own background conditions, assumptions and values, which to a certain extent influence the very task of analysis and performatively shape its outcomes. This helps us in seeing ourselves “with the eyes of the other” (Heinz von Foerster) and being sensitive for the pain and suffering of others (Richard Rorty). However, the precise conceptualization and modelling of the theory-agency (or expert-citizen) relationship, both theoretically and methodologically, must remain empirically open.

**Conclusion:** Responding to the persistent challenges of the postmodern-poststructural tradition, social theory should self-reflexively and self-critically produce communicable and practically useful interpretations and explanations of itself and the outer worlds of society and culture. It should also leave space for alternative collective projects for dominated groups (explaining the deeper normative assumptions that are involved in such projects) and imaginatively mediate between scientific expertise and the wider public sphere. Against the often corrosive epistemological skepticism and nihilism, social theory should ultimately develop a comprehensive analysis of the social forces of human emancipation and the possibility of a transformative politics of human emancipation[11].

**REFERENCES**