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Nsociological Theory Critique of the Naturalist Conception of Sociology: A Constructionist Alternative

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of the epistemological status of sociology. It discusses the rival and competing approaches which have traditionally dealt with this issue. First, the naturalist conception which considers science as one and unified enterprise that obeys to general positivistic principles. A conception best expressed in David Hume's notion of law. The second represented by hermeneutics which assumes a radical methodological distinction between natural sciences and social sciences, based on significant differences between their objects. This was best expressed by prominent German philosophers like H. Rickert and W. Dilthey. In sociology properly speaking, the debate represented a problematic issue over which two approaches were radically opposed for a long time. The agency versus structure debates started since Weber and Durkheim late in the nineteenth century is still, to some extent, going on. We consider this problematic in the light of new developments in sociological theory and research. The constructionist approach developed through the works of many sociologists in response to the stalemate resulting from that dichotomy brought many fresh ideas and imagination to sociological research. Constructionism as an approach brings together sociologists from different intellectual traditions and horizons. Important contributions were made by Norbert Elias, Peter Berger and Tomas Luckmann, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, ...etc. We suggest that constructionism provides a real opportunity to overcome the deadlock in which sociology found itself. To this end, the paper spells out some key ideas of this alternative approach which is necessarily interdisciplinary in nature.

Keywords: Sociology, naturalism, constructionism, agency, structure, interdisciplinarity.

نقد التصور الطبيعوي في علم الاجتماع

العياشي عنصر

تورنتو – كندا

الملخّص

تتناول هذه الورقة سؤال المكانة الإبستيمولوجية لعلم الاجتماع. وتستعرض المقاربات المنهجية المتنافسة والمتصارعة التي تعاملت تقليديا مع هذه المسألة. بدءً بالتصور الطبيعوي الذي يعتبر العلم مشروعا واحدا وموحدا يخضع لمبادئ وضعية واضحة ودقيقة. يعتبر الفيلسوف الانكليزي ديفيد هيوم أفضل من عبر عن هذا الاتجاه من خلال تصوره لمفهوم القانون. بينما يتمثل الموقف الثاني في المقاربة التأويلية التفسيرية التي تقوم على افتراض وجود تباين جذري بين العلوم الطبيعية والعلوم الاجتماعية؛ بسبب التباين الشديد في طبيعة موضوعاتهما. ذلك ما عبرت عنه بوضوح، منذ البداية، شخصيات مرموقة في الفلسفة الألمانية أمثال؛ هينريتش ريكرت، وفيلهالم دلثي. أما في علم الاجتماع فقد كانت هذه المسألة موضوع نقاش حاد بين مقاربات متباينة ومتنافسة منذ نشأة هذا العلم في القرن التاسع عشر. كانت البداية مع الجدل الذي ساد حول ثنائية الفعل والبناء، أو الحامل الاجتماعي social agency والبنية الاجتماعية social structure مع كل من إميل دوركهايم وماكس فيبر، جدل ما يزال قائما لحد اليوم. نتناول هذه الإشكالية في ضوء التطورات الحديثة في مجالي النظرية والبحث السوسيولوجي، ونركز بالذات على مقاربة البنائية الاجتماعية social constructionism التي ظهرت كأنموذج له تأثير قوي يقدم طرحا بديلا في تحليل المسائل الفلسفية والاجتماعية والسياسية. شارك في تطوير هذه المقاربة عديد من علماء الاجتماع المرموقين أمثال؛ نوربرت إلايس، بيتر برغر، توماس لوكمان، بيار بورديو، أنطوني غيدنز وغيرهم. وتزعم هذه الورقة أن البنائية الاجتماعية تقدم بديلا حقيقيا للنظر في هذه الإشكالية، وتقدم فرصة ثمينة لتجاوز الانسداد الذي ميز النقاش حولها، وقد أضر كثيرا بمكانة علم الاجتماع. من أجل ذلك تقوم الورقة بطرح الأفكار الأساسية لهذه المقاربة البديلة، وتشرحها من خلال أعمال مساهمين رئيسيين تميزت بتنوع يجسد الطبيعة البينية للبحث في مجال علم الاجتماع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم الاجتماع، الطبيعوية، البنائية، الحامل الاجتماعي، الفاعل، البنية الاجتماعية، البينية.

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Introduction

One of the legacies of classical sociological theory is that we are confronted today with a number of profound and apparently persistent problems of a general theoretical nature. The issue of the relation between social and natural sciences is one of these problems, an issue that raised much heated debate and continues to do so . On one side, there are those who strongly admired and advocated natural sciences as a methodological model for social sciences. Praised for their experimental basis and predictive successes, natural sciences served as a starting point for rethinking the scientific status of social knowledge and practice.[1] This trend is clearly dominant in the thought of the nineteenth century pioneers as well as in the work of the more recent thinkers of social sciences who are evidently influenced by some form of positivism. On the other side, many thinkers acknowledge that social or human sciences cannot, and should not, be considered on the same epistemological basis as natural sciences. This notion was promoted by the early philosophers of knowledge in late nineteenth century Germany and the more recent thinkers like Peter Winch, Alfred Schutz, Paul Ricoeur and Max Weber. Further, this issue has attracted the attention of many contemporary and influential social scientists including Norbert Elias, Peter Berger, Tomas Luckmann, Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, who made concerted efforts to propose a more suitable solution to this problem.

The second issue which attracted the attention of these reform-minded social theorists is that of the relation between the individual and society, or to use the more contemporary terminology, that of "agency" and "structure." It is an issue which occupies a privileged position in contemporary debates and particularly overlaps with that concerning the relation between natural and social sciences. Here, as well, contrasting views and positions have thrived. On the one hand, there are those who have maintained that social structure precedes the individual and constrains his actions. Thus, these constraining structures are objects for social science

1- Held, D & Thompson, J.B: Social Theory of Modern Societies: Anthony Giddens and His Critics, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989 p2.

analysis. This view is widely shared and present in social sciences' literature from Durkheim to the more recent versions of structuralism and structural Marxism. On the other hand, such claim has been criticized by Weber and others from the hermeneutics tradition, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology thinkers, who argued that social sciences must take account of the complexity and diversity of elements constituting the social world. These include meanings, motives and reasons held and expressed by actors in real life situations.

As a result, both sides maintain and defend their entrenched positions in the theoretical landscape which seems more like a battlefield between the advocates of objectivism and subjectivism, determinism and voluntarism.[2] But many contemporary social scientists such as Norbert Elias, Peter Berger, Tomas Luckmann Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, but to cite a few, contend that such conflicting views were exaggerated and have caused much harm to the field of social sciences. They recognize that a more refined and flexible approach can, and should be, developed to take account of the complex methodological and theoretical issues involved.

It should be noted further, that the debate over these issues is not limited to what came to be known as academic sociology, but characterizes also various trends of Historical Materialism. The debate opposes orthodox dialectical materialists on one side, and the break-away reformists, like G. Lucas, A. Gramsci, the Frankfurt School and J-P Sartre, on the other. However, common characteristics exist among different factions on both sides (Academic Sociology and Historical Materialism). First, they adopt an empiricist position concerning the nature of human knowledge in general, and second, they advocate a positivist epistemology for the natural sciences in particular.[3]

The major trait of this approach in sociology is the assumption that social phenomena have no existence as social objects beyond their conceptions and usages by social actors. The cleavage between the natural and social sciences is, therefore, founded upon a fundamental postulate claiming that with the exception of thought itself, only material objects can be endowed with "real" or "effective" existence.

1-The naturalist conception of science

The naturalist conception of science can be defined as one which assumes an essential unity of science (whether real or supposed) in terms of the methods of acquiring knowledge. Two variants of the naturalist conception could be distinguished from the mainstream position. First, *reductionism* obliterates differences between natural and social fields, insisting on the existence of a complete congruence between the natural and the social sciences in terms of their object of enquiry. Second, *Scientism* denies the existence of differences in terms of methods of enquiry for natural and social phenomena, whether the two have different objects of study or not.

2- Ibid. p. 3.

3- Bhasker, R. «On the Possibility of social scientific knowledge and the limits of naturalism», in Mepham, J. & Ruben, D.H. (eds), Issues in Marxist Philosophy, Vol. 3, Brighton, harvester Press, 1979, p.107

The main characteristic of naturalism, and its two variants, is that of being a *naturalist positivist conception.* It is based on the belief that phenomena, both in nature and in society, have a concrete and independent existence from thought making them an object of direct empirical knowledge. Opposed to this naturalist positivist approach is the anti-positivist notion of science. This latter embraces a variety of methods shared by both the natural and social sciences, without denying differences related to their respective objects, the material and the social worlds.

Furthermore, there are many ontological and epistemological factors which differentiate natural and social phenomena. Such differences produce a number of barriers against the application of the naturalist conception to the study of society and its phenomena. However, it is those differences which make a scientific analysis of society possible and, hence, the identification of the limits of naturalism becomes an enquiry in the conditions making interdisciplinary sociology a possibility.[4]

Despite much heated debate on these issues, a relative consensus on a specific conception of science exists, one which considers science as sustained dialectical process composed of three major steps. The first identifies particular phenomena; the second formulates preliminary explanations (hypotheses), while the third puts those hypothetical explanations to testing. At the end, the actual mechanisms which generate phenomena have to be revealed by this complex process. Such a conception of science contends that the main characteristic of scientific knowledge is to be found in its movement from appearances, or givens, to latent structures which generate and determine given objects.[5]

At this point an important question comes to mind, namely, is it possible to apply this dialectical conception to studying society? But before exploring such possibility, we should first find out what kind of things are societies? For, in the absence of a relatively clear definition of the specific character of our object of enquiry, any discourse on method becomes arbitrary and vague. Hence, the starting point for any scientific investigation on society should necessarily begin by asking: what characterizes societies and makes them possible objects for scientific enquiry? It is important to prove that societies are entities which have real and effective existence. Failure to do so means losing a chance to formulate an alternative conception, one which is neither naturalist nor empiricist.[6]

2- Limits of the naturalist conception

The conception of the social as an object for scientific enquiry brings into light the problematic relation between individual and society. From its inception, sociological theory has

4- Bhaskar, R. Op. Cit. p. 109

5- Keat, R. & Urry, J. Social Science as Theory, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975, chapter2.

6- Benton, T. Philosophical Foundations of the Three Sociologies, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977, chapter 5.

proceeded from two premises.[7] The first is represented by Emil Durkheim who considered social entities as independent and objective facts standing apart from consciousness. The second expressed by Max Weber who perceived social entities as an outcome of social actions. Many theoretical perspectives (including phenomenological sociology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and even structural functionalism) are variations of these two major premises. A similar tension in the conception of relations between individual and society can be found in different versions of Historical Materialism; Orthodox Marxists, on one side, and reformists like Lucas, Frankfurt School and Gramsci, etc..., on the other.[8]

Now, we have to specify the limits of the naturalist conception in sociology. This can be done by revealing major characteristics of social structures. The characteristics are seen, at the same time, as representing major obstacles against the adoption of a naturalist conception in the study of social phenomena.

1- Social structures, as opposed to their counterparts in nature, do not exist separately from the activities of social actors (individuals or collectivities) which generate and control them. In this respect Peter Berger argues: "Social structure has no existence of its won, independently of human activities which produce it". However, he also notes, once produced, "social structure is faced by individual as an alien entity… as a constraint…, it is there outside, not affected by his aspirations…, different from his subjectivity and resisting to it"[9]

2- Social structures, as opposed to natural structures, are social products and as such they constitute an object of continuous transformation, giving them two important features: relative stability and relative independence.

3- Since social structures are generated by human activities and social practices, they are intimately related to the conceptions held by individuals about such activities and practices.

4- Since social structures are social products, there must be a sociological explanation for the activities and practices which generate them. They cannot be explained by reference to non sociological factors; although the latter might influence such activities.[10]

The aforementioned characteristics of social structures seem to limit the possibility of adopting a naturalist conception in sociological theory seriously. This is based on the claim that society has an existence of its own,

7- Reference is made to what came to be known as Academic Sociology in opposition to Historical Materialism which was considered relatively more successful in dealing with this issue. This has been the case since Marx›s theses on Feuerbach in which he stresses the dialectical nature of relations between men and social conditions. This tendency was developed further in Marxists› literature despite reductionist interpretations of much of this literature by critics.

8- Swingewood, A. Marx and Modern Social Theory, London, MacMillan Press, 1975, chap 2.

9- Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. The Social Construction of Reality, A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge, New York, 1966.

10- Bhaskar, R. A Realist Theory of Science, New Jersey, Hassock, 2nd edition, 1978, p.122

objectively and independently separated from individuals. In this respect, it is possible to prove that society is a real and objective entity using the principle of causality following Durkheim's demonstration of the priority of society over individuals. However, if intentional and purposive action is a necessary condition to achieve specific positions in the material world, it follows that characteristics and forces conferring intentionality upon individuals have an equally real and objective existence. Similarly, if it can be proved that, without society, individuals cannot perform certain actions, and assuming the principles of causality and inference at work, then it is possible to establish the existence of society prior to, and independently of, individuals. Durkheim has relied upon the coercive character of social phenomena to prove their objective existence after having proven society's independence through the principle of the externality of social phenomena.[11] However, contrary to Durkheim, it should be stressed that individuals constitute the only and sole effective force of history, i.e. nothing whatsoever happens without them and without their actions. Moreover, social structures have to be seen not only as barriers and limitations, but also as resources and opportunities without which individuals cannot carry out their actions and practices.[12]

These ontological limits on the naturalist conception of sociology undermine any rich and promising analysis based on this approach. Such limits were related to the specific character of social structures as products of agents' representations and actions, and to elements of temporality and space, or what Alain Touraine calls historicism.[13] In addition, epistemological limits further reduce the possibility of adopting a naturalist conception. Two significant obstacles will be considered here:

1- Society as an object for knowledge is above all a theoretical entity, i.e. not empirically perceptible similar in that to magnetic fields. This makes it difficult to define or perceive society independently of its consequences, although, it does not make it any different from other objects of scientific investigation. Most importantly, it is not only that society could not be defined independently of its consequences, but it *does not exist independently of such consequences.*

Accordingly, the major epistemological limitation characterizing the natural conception is not that objects of sociological investigations are not empirically given, but the fact that they constitute open systems, i.e. entities which have no relatively stable empirical regularities. This raises a major methodological problem, for most theories in the field of the philosophy of knowledge, epistemology and the related methodological strategies, are based on the theoretical assumption of closed systems. As a result, such

11-Durkheim, E. Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique, Paris, P.U.F, 14eme, 1960; pp 2-3.

12- Giddens, A. Central Problems in Social Theory. London, Macmillan, 1979, chapter 2.

13- Touraine; A. La Production de la société, Paris, éditions Seuil, 1978

theories would be hardly applicable to social sciences and if applied could lead to major practical problems. This, as Bhaskar claims, is true of Hume's theory of causality and law, statistical models for explication, inductive theories of science and their criteria of verification, as well as Popper's theory on scientific rationality and his criteria of falsification.[14]

The absence of closed systems in the social world and the quasi-impossibility of constructing such situations create major methodological problems. Most important is that sociologists are denied the possibility of *natural testing situations* so necessary for verifying the validity of their theories. This means that rational criteria for verifying sociological theories could not be of a predictable nature as in natural sciences, but merely explicative and law-like general statements are mere expressions of tendencies. However, we must add that this is the case even in natural sciences where the opportunities offered by experiments to test theories remain highly important. Theory testing reveals the hidden structures of phenomena, and thus provides better chances and conditions for scientific discovery, something which is generally lacking in social sciences despite persistent attempts.

2- The second epistemological limitation concerns the relations between science and its objects of investigation. Sociology, in this respect, differs significantly from other disciplines in that it constitutes an integral part of its own research field.[15] Hence, sociology becomes an activity that can be explained by the same concepts, categories and theories it produces. This makes sociology an object of investigation in its own right like no other discipline in natural sciences, or even in the humanities. The imbrications of social activities and practices with agents' values and representations are such that we can hardly imagine them as independent and separate objects for investigation. Hence, it becomes utterly difficult to imagine the existence of society without any form of knowledge about it, be it scientific, normative or ideological, i.e., the principle of reflexivity.[16]

The aforementioned limitations lead us to adopt a constructionist approach to the double sided problematique of the relation between society and individual, structure and action. By applying this approach to the activity of knowledge production we are in a position to say that the production of scientifically valid social theories is based, at least partly, on the transformation of pseudo-scientific ideas and ideologies.[17] However, since this transformation takes place within historically and socially determined conditions, it certainly bears the imprint of events taking place in society at that time. Based on this assumption, it can be said that periods of transition and crises provide agents with opportunities

14- Bhaskar, R. A Realist Theory of Science, Op. Cit. chap. 2

15- This point will be discussed further when considering contributions made by Elias, Bourdieu and Giddens

16- All three thinkers we are dealing with have in some way or another considered this point.

17- Althusser, L. Reading Capital, Paris, Francois Maspero, Vol. 1, 1968. pp. 54-57.

to uncover hidden mechanisms, which would otherwise be more ambiguous and evasive, as they become relatively detached from, or in discordance with, their representations and activities. Although such situations get by no means near to the rich opportunities provided by experiments, they nevertheless, offer a necessary, albeit limited, alternative to experiments in social sciences. The fact that the social world is constituted of open systems is something which reduces reliance on historicism in the sense of not being able to make general deductive predictions. On the other hand, the historically determined nature of social systems means they are undergoing constant change and transformation. However, sociological theory can neither provide us with reliable predictions on such change, nor can it precisely point to its direction because social systems are open and contingent simultaneously. This specific ontological character of the social added to the epistemological limitations make sociological theory an endless process of practical-theoretical constructions in need of constant revision and reformulation. Although this is generally in line with the state of the art in scientific investigation, in sociology, relations between the dynamic and transformative nature of social phenomena and developments in scientific knowledge are more complex and interactive. This important fact puts more pressure on any sociological theory claiming adequacy. Similarly, any methodological procedure claiming efficiency has to be constantly alert to changes and developments.

3- Constructionism: a complex alternative

The dualist conception of the relation between individual and society was seen by many contemporary sociologists as not only theoretically unfounded, but also inadequate for grasping the complexity of social reality. These sociologists endeavoured to bridge the gap between the contending sides by putting forward new and imaginative ideas. In the remaining part of this paper, I consider some of the widely acclaimed contributors in this debate including that of Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens, but before doing so let me try to answer the question what is constructionism?

It should be said from the outset, that the constructionist approach does not constitute a school or a homogeneous tendency; rather it refers to various contributions made by a number of sociologists who emerge from diverse intellectual backgrounds, using different conceptual apparatuses and research methods with varying modes of operation and relations to empirical research. Nevertheless, such contributions share some common grounds and elements that could be summarized in the following points:

1- In the constructionist approach, social realities are conceived of as historical daily constructions of individuals and collective actors. Such constructions in their singularity and plurality do not necessarily stem from a conscious will, and they even have a tendency to escape the actors' control.

2- Historicity is a major notion for constructionism and has a three-fold meaning:

a- The universe around us is made up on the basis of past pre-constructions "men make their history, but not always under conditions of their choice."[18]

b- Men appropriate past social forms, they reproduce and transform them, as well as create new ones during social interaction and practices of daily life.

c- Both past and recently created forms open up the way for new possibilities and diversity of future developments. This theme was best expressed by the French philosopher, Jean Ladrière, who claims that "action as historical is localized and objectified in an externality constantly putting its weight over the existent as a constraint, yet at the same time opens up real perspectives."[19]

This refers us to the dual movement of internalisation / objectivation. Thus, forms of learning and socialisation make the internalisation of an external (objectified) universe possible, while individual and collective actions result in objectifying (externalising) the internal universe. That is exactly what J.P. Sartre following Hegel called "a dual movement of internalising the external and externalising the internal."[20]

It is worth noting that although constructionism in its diverse formulations, calls for investigating processes of social reality construction (a moment of re-construction), it is nevertheless based on assuming a specific moment of de-construction, i.e., questioning what is presented as 'given', 'natural', 'necessary', and 'homogeneous'. Constructionism is, therefore, a new form of realism which must be distinguished from classical positivism as it questions the "given" and conceives of social reality as dynamic, plural and multiple.[21]

Although Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens have made their contributions in different temporal and special contexts, they have exerted, and continue to have, considerable influence over a large public. Despite their differences, these authors share the common concern of renewing sociological theory and resolving some of its dilemmas (individual vs society / action vs structure / subjectif vs objectif). In so doing, they seem to accord predominance to social structures and macro aspects of social reality, without loosing sight of the significance of subjective and interactive aspects.

3.1- Norbert Elias: a Pioneer

In his reflection over the scientific status of knowledge, Norbert Elias tackles the problematique under

18- Marx, K. Le 18 Brumaire de louis Bonaparte, French translation, Paris, éditions sociales, 1972, p. 15

19- Ladrière, J. «Philosophie Politique et Philosophie Analytique» in J. Ladrière et P. Van Paris (eds), Fondements d'une théorie de la justice; Loraine, la Neuve; éditions de l'institut supérieur de philosophie; 1984, p. 220.

20- Sartre, J.P. Questions de méthode; Paris, Gallimard; coll. Tel; 1986. pp. 90-92

21- Corcuff; Philipe: Les nouvelles sociologies: Constructions de la réalité sociale, Editions Nathan, Paris, 1995.

investigation by distinguishing social sciences from natural sciences on the basis of two major characteristics:

1- Their objects are, at the same time, agents with specific representations of their position within society.
2- Researchers are themselves part of the universe they are studying.[22] Such characteristics led Elias to define the posture of the social scientist as being in a dialectic relation between distance and commitment. Distance because scientific rigueur imposes a rupture with preconceived ideas of all nature and sources. Commitment, because "understanding the functioning of human groups necessitates an insider's view of the experiences actors have of their own groups as well as other groups."[23]

For Elias, the criticism of classical opposition between individual and society is a fundamental step guiding his entire sociological contribution. To question this opposition, he argues, we need to distance ourselves from the underlying substantive tendencies deeply-rooted into our current usages of language. Behind the substantive "individual" and "society," we assume the existence of substances "things which are quite visible and tangible."[24] Such assumption, he claims, "depicts the individual and society as two different things, as though they were a table and a chair."[25] To solve this problem, Elias makes use of history. He shows that representation of self as separate from the external environment, as we know it today, is to some extent something new. First, it appeared in Antiquity, then with much force in the Renaissance period. In his work, "Society of Individuals", he traces the historical emergence of the problematique of self-consciousness and of the inner (as opposed to others and the outer), in Western philosophy and particularly in the significant contribution of René Descartes (1596-1650) and his famous "I think, I am." Relying on historicism, he shows how the representation of individuals' identities in relation to references of "I" and "We," has changed according to epochs and societies. He points out the great importance gained by "I" and individuation in contemporary Western societies. Such a process is inherently social in the sense that it characterises personality structures associated with particularly dominant types of relations among men in Western societies.

This historicist conception led Elias to an original way of resolving the classical opposition: individual / society. The individual is neither conceived of as an external entity to society, nor is society considered as external to individuals. Hence, society is not seen as a simple aggregation of individuals (methodological individualism). For Elias, the object of sociology is, therefore, 'interdependent people'. This is a new conception in which "one concept (individual) refers to people in the singular, the other (society) to people in the plural."[26]

22- N. Elias, Engagement et distanciation- contribution à la sociologie de la connaissance. (French edition), Paris, fayard 1993, p 24.
23- Ibid, p 29.
24- Elias, N. What Is Sociology? London, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd. 1978, p 16.
25- Ibid. p. 134.
26- Ibid. p. 121

The notion of interdependence is of at most importance in the theoretical construction of Elias. Society is seen as a complex configuration of various forms of relations characterised by a multitude of mutual dependencies which link individuals to each other. Such configurations are of variable sizes, starting from a group "of four men playing cards…" up to a nation or group of nations. What really distinguishes these configurations are the length and complexity of chains of mutual relations binding individuals together. However, another most important trait of these configurations is the fact that they are generally marked by inequality, dominance and power. For Elias, power is not considered as a substance appropriated by some and lacking for others. It is rather considered as a characteristic of interdependent and unequal relations. It means that everyone is somehow constrained by such relations. In fact, through this notion, Elias resolves another classical opposition, that of freedom versus determinism. He acknowledges:

"Society is constituted of a tissue of interdependencies within which people enjoy a certain margin of freedom of choice, which imposes at the same time limits on such freedom."[27]

However, for Elias, interdependencies do not function as external constraints on individuals' choice; they also participate in building internal structures of the personality.[28] At this stage, the notion of 'habitus' first used by Elias before gaining its reputation with Pierre Bourdieu surfaces. For Elias, habitus is a sort of social "imprint" upon personality, a product of the various configurations inside which the individual exists and acts.[29]

3. 2- Pierre Bourdieu: structuralist constructionism

Pierre Bourdieu has been acclaimed as one of the most influential sociologists at the turn of the twentieth century. He is one of the rare sociologists who managed to combine ideas from three traditionally opposed intellectual streams, i.e. Marx, Durkheim and Weber. He also has the merit of bringing together in his work various disciplines of social sciences; being a true plusridisciplinary thinker. His rich and multiform contribution to sociology covers a wide range of fields and issues. Moreover, he ensures that theoretical arguments were never detached from empirical evidence. What he calls "structuralist constructionism" best describes his method, especially since the late seventies of the last century.

Bourdieu defines structuralist constructionism by putting it at the crossroads between the objective and the subjective. He explicitly says:

"*By structuralism or structuralist, I want to show the existence within*

27- Elias, N. La Société de la Coure; (French edition) Paris, Flammarion, coll. «champ», 1985

28- The individual is part of a network of relationships which precede him (such as family, social groups, nation…) which are themselves a product of a long and complex history and contribute to modeling individual personalities.

29- Elias, N. La société des individus, (French edition); Paris, Fayard 1991, pp. 239-240

the social world itself (...), of objective structures, independent from consciousness and agents' will. They are capable of orienting or constraining their practices, or their representations. By constructionism, I want to indicate the existence of a social genesis, on one hand, of schemes of perception, of thought and action that constitute what I have called "habitus", and on the other, social structures and particularly the existence of what I call fields."[30]

However, in this double dimension, "objective" and "constructed" conceptions of reality, Bourdieu seems to privilege objective structures. When considering the sociologists investigation of reality, two moments are distinguished: the objective moment first, then comes the subjective moment. As he puts it:

"On one side, the objective structures constructed by the sociologist in the objectivist moment by putting aside the agents' representations provide bases for subjective representations and constitute structural limits bringing pressure to bear over interactions. But on the other side, these representations have to be considered, if we are to account particularly for daily individual and collective struggles aiming to transform or maintain those structures."[31]

Habitus and Field: key concepts

Considering the production of the social world, Bourdieu clearly states:

"The principle of historic action be it that of the artist, scientist or governor, a worker, or an employee, is not a subject who would confront an object constituted in the external. The principle resides neither in the consciousness nor in things, but in the relation between two states of the social, i.e. history objectified into things, taking the shape of institutions, and history materialised into bodies, taking the shape of a system of durable dispositions which I call habitus."32

Habitus: Bourdieu defines this concept in more precise terms than Elias had done before**.** He defines it "as a system of durable and transposable dispositions."[33]

Dispositions: meaning tendencies to perceive, feel, do and think in a specific manner, internalised and integrated, mostly in a conscious manner, by every individual given his objective conditions of existence and social trajectory.

Transposable: as dispositions learned within specific experience (familial) tend to affect experiences in other spheres of life (professional), they provide the first element of proof attesting to the unity of the individual.

Durable: while these dispositions can change during one's experiences, they are also strongly entrenched in us and tend to resist changes, hence acquiring certain continuity in the life of people.

30- Bourdieu, P. «Espace social et pouvoir symbolique», in Choses Dites, Paris, Minuit, 1987, p. 147

31-Bourdieu, P. «Espace social et pouvoir symbolique» Op. Cit. p. 150

32- Bourdieu, P. Leçon sur la leçon, Paris, Minuit, 1982, pp. 37-38

33- Ibid. p 38.

System: means that such dispositions have a tendency to be unified, but for Bourdieu, the unity and continuity of the personality ensured by habitus are not those which the individual consciously represents for himself, which he calls "a biographical illusion", but a unity and continuity largely unconscious and reconstructed by the sociologist.[34]

For Bourdieu, habitus is not just a reproducer of social structures of which it is a product. It is rather constituted of "generating principles." It functions like computer software (which is partly self adjusting). It is called upon to provide responses for diverse problematic situations, making use of a limited number of schedules of action and thought. Thus, it can have natural reactions when confronted to conventional situations and more innovative actions when faced with new situations.

Field: it is the second important concept over which most of Bourdieu's work evolves. Fields constitute for him the other side of the process, i.e. "externalisation of the internal." It is worth noting that Bourdieu uses the term "agents" instead of "actors" to indicate that they are driven by both inner and outer influences, rather than acting freely.

For Bourdieu, the concept of field points to a sphere of social life which has progressively become autonomously constituted around social relations, stakes and specific resources which differ from those of other fields. So people pursue different things in different fields, economic, political, sports and so on. Every field is, therefore, a field of forces within which resources are unequally distributed between dominant and dominated. It is also a battle field where social agents struggle either to preserve, or to transform power relations. For Bourdieu, both the definition of the field itself and of its frontiers (who should be part of it?) is at stake in these struggles. This is, among other things, what distinguishes the notion of field with its open and dynamic character from that of a closed system. Every field has its own mechanisms of capital accumulation. Hence, for Bourdieu, capital is not only economic capital as with Marx and Marxists, but there is a plurality of capitals, in fact as much as there are fields; (cultural, political, economic, symbolic…etc). In his view, social reality has a multidimensional representation rather than being one-dimensional. The social world is constituted of a plurality of autonomous fields, each one defining specific modes of domination.

Bourdieu admits borrowing from Marx the notion of social reality as a configuration of power relations between social groups engaged in historical struggle. He also acknowledges borrowing from Weber the idea that the social world is a configuration of meaningful relations giving reality a symbolic dimension. Therefore, he considers representations and language to be actively engaged in the construction of social reality.

34- Bourdieu, P. «L›illusion biographique», in Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, No. 62-63, Juin, 1986.

Action: The practical logic

One of the most obscure, yet highly relevant, sides of Bourdieu's work is his sociology of action, first drafted in "*Outline for a Theory of Practice*"[35] and developed later in "*The Practical Sense*" in 1980. Following L. Wittgenstein and M. Merleau- Ponty's tradition, he started with a critique of the intellectualist approaches which reduced action to the researcher's point of view, while dismissing that of the agent. Such approaches are criticised for failing "to take into account the practical relation to praxis and substituting for it the observer's relation to the object."[36] He considers that as intellectualism, a kind of objectivism which comprehends action from the outer, or from above as an object of knowledge, with no consideration for the agent's relation to his action. Bourdieu opposes a practical relation to praxis to this intellectual approach attributing the sociologist's view of action to the agent. He considers it essential to action in a world that "imposes its presence with its emergencies, its things to be done or said, which directly command movements and words…"[37]

Bourdieu distinguishes two postures, that of the observer who thinks and talks about actors, and that of the agent who acts "caught in the midst of action" with its emergencies. Hence, action for him concedes to "a logic which is not that of logic," a practical logic. This interest in the practical side of practice leads Bourdieu to focus on the practical sense, one of the agents' most important skills inscribed in the body and its movements. This is a skill which is used only in specific situations when facing practical problems, (a footballer on the pitch, a worker in front of machines, a politician in a meeting, a teacher in a classroom…etc.). As an integral part of habitus the practical sense permits the agent to save reflection and energy when acting. Thus, it is an operator of the economy of practice.

Bourdieu's sociology of action is therefore one of the rare contributions showing interest in the issue of practical logic. However, as his critics argue, he seems "to bend too much the stick to the other side."[38] Others to the contrary say, Bourdieu puts too much weight on structures, (structures in the heads and bodies as well as structures in objects and institutions). This leads him to neglect face to face interaction in the process of constructing social reality. He does so because he thinks interactions hide the structures which are realised within them. The priority he concedes to objective aspects of reality results sometimes in the reactivation of the couple appearance/ substance which tend to push him away from his constructionist perspective. Hence, his analysis of the constitution of social reality stumbles against this opposition between a true reality (objective) and a false reality (subjective), while a more authentic constructionist approach

35- Bourdieu, P. Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique, preceded by three ethnological studies on Kabylia in Algeria: Genève; Droze 1972.

36- Bourdieu, P. Le Sens Pratique, Paris, Minuit, 1980, p.121

37- Ibid. p. 124

38- Ladrière, P. & Caille, A. « Esquisse d›une critique de l›économie générale de la pratique», Cahiers du LASA, Université de Caen, «Lectures de Pierre Bourdieu», No. Spécial 8-9, 1988, pp. 204-205

would have resulted in a conception of multiple realities in the manner of A. Schutz.[39] Nevertheless, Bourdieu's sociological constructionism remains probably one of the most influential trends since the Second World War, not only in the French speaking intellectual sphere, but worldwide.

3. 3- Anthony Giddens: the theory of structuration

Anthony Giddens has emerged as a prominent figure among sociological theorists who have undertaken on themselves the task of renewal and reconstruction of theoretical concepts and methodological perceptions which together form sociological theory since the early 1970's. He extensively published in this area and has since exercised a growing influence over debates on sociology theory. Given his critical and highly original contributions to these debates, Giddens currently stands as a major figure of constructionist sociology. Students of Giddens' thought distinguish two main aspects in his contributions.[40] The first involves an attempt to rethink and resolve specific theoretical issues. He has reformulated some of the traditional issues dating back to classical sociological theory. In so doing, he develops a cluster of new ideas and concepts which come to be known as the "Theory of Structuration." The second aspect of his contribution is an attempt to analyse developments and transformations in modern industrial societies. Drawing on the work of some major classical thinkers, particularly Marx and Weber, Giddens has developed a critical and imaginative account of the process of modernity in Western Europe.

The Theory of Structuration:

In a series of works starting from "*New rules of Sociological Method*", to "*The constitution of society*", Giddens has considered major contributions to sociological theory both classical and contemporary. He has not only produced a diagnosis with strengths and weaknesses of past contributions, but put forward his own new and challenging ideas and concepts in his "Theory of Structuration." [41] In this theory, he attempts to bridge the gap between contending trends which either emphasise meaningful action, or constraining structures. It is another original attempt to rethink the relation between two sides which are essentially intermingled. Sociological theory, he argues:

> *"must acknowledge, as it has not done previously, time–space intersections as essentially involved in all social existence… social activity is always constituted in three intersecting moments of difference: temporally, paradigmatically (invoking structure which is present only in its instantiation) and spatially. All social practices are situated activities in each of these senses."*[42]

39- Corcuff; Philipe: Les nouvelles sociologies: Constructions de la réalité sociale, Editions Nathan, Paris, 1995, pp 41-42.

40- Held, D. & Thompson, J. B. Social Theory of Modern Societies, Op. Cit p. 2

41- Held, D. & Thompson, J.B. Op Cit p. 3

42- Giddens, A. Central Problems in Social theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis. Macmillan press, London, 1979, p. 54.

The Notion of Structure:

Having made a critical review of the various schools of social thought on the use of the concepts "structure" and "system", Giddens suggests new and different definitions for these concepts in the following manner:

Structure: "Rules and resources, organised as properties of social systems. Structures only exist as 'structural properties'.

System: Reproduced relations between actors or collectivities, organised as regular social practices.

Structuration: Conditions governing the continuity or transformation of structures, and therefore the production of systems."[43]

For Giddens, structure should not be thought of as a framework whose borders act as constraints, but rather as set of rules, resources and opportunities which come with interaction. He seems to draw on linguistics in making parallels between "structure" and the rules of grammar. He thinks both are enabling and constraining at the same time. They provide individuals with certain capacities to use, yet they limit such capacities, so that the choices and resources offered are not unrestricted. This generative approach to structure makes it both constitutive of everyday practices and actions, while being at the same time reproduced by those practices and actions. Giddens calls this phenomenon "the duality of structure."[44] This conception allows him to argue that individuals know as much of their actions and the structural features of their universe, as they know about their language and its rules. But their accounts of both their actions and their social universe are constrained or restricted, and it falls to the social sciences to explain and disclose the aspects which lay beyond the grasp of ordinary people as actors in the social world. In this, Giddens, contrary to many advocates of interpretative approaches, concedes the need and importance of objectivistic concepts such as "cause."[45] However, like Elias and Bourdieu, he accepts the claims of hermeneutics in one important respect, that the social sciences have a unique relation to their object characterised by reflexivity. But he argues that the social sciences are not alone in this endeavour. Ordinary actors, too, pursue a similar goal in their routine everyday life activities. This fact gives the social sciences what Giddens calls a "double hermeneutic" character. It means that social sciences' outcomes are available for actors in the real world, yet they are also critical of beliefs, conceptions and actions of those same ordinary people.

One of the most important and creative aspects of Giddens' contribution, as Held and Thompson suggest, is his use of the notions of time and space and the way he relates them to his theory of structuration. Rather than taking time and space as abstract categories,

43- Ibid, p. 66

44- Ibid. p. 4.

45- He differs in this respect from thinkers such as Peter Winch in his: The Idea of Social Science…, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1958, see Giddens' critique of Winch in New Rules of Sociological Method, London, Hutchinson, 1977. Giddens' position is much closer to that developed by Bourdieu on this issue.

Giddens thinks and integrates them in his theoretical framework in terms of 'presence' and 'absence'.[46] Social interaction is situated both in space and time and actors are present in it both spatially and temporally. However, Giddens is well aware of the fact that recent developments in the forms and instruments of communication and transport have drastically altered this scheme. The physical presence of actors is no longer necessary for their participation in social interaction[47]. Most interestingly, Giddens brings these developments into perspective and ties them with issues of power and control exercised by social institutions including nation states.[48]

The theory of structuration represents the foundation for a whole complex system of ideas built around it. The concepts of action and structure have been subjected to critical review and redefinition by Giddens, as well as employed to examine and analyse a wide range of theoretical and empirical issues. This has rendered Giddens' contributions an issue of debate in its own right.

Giddens and his critics

Giddens' contributions to the development and renewal of sociological theory have left a great impact. As any imaginative, daring and original thinker, Giddens has come under a sustained intellectual scrutiny and attracted much criticism form various social sciences' students and specialists. Some of Giddens' critics have raised the important question of how to evaluate the critical character of sociological theory in Giddens' version.[49] Bernstein, for example, argues that Giddens is evasive on the exact meaning of this notion. Moreover, closer examination reveals, as he says, "not only ambiguity and vagueness, but conflicting and contradictory claims."[50] In his response to Bernstein, Giddens identifies four levels of critique in sociological theory: intellectual, political, ideological and moral. Contrary to some social theorists who either assume the possibility of reaching consensus on controversial issues (like Habermas), or those who adopt a more realistic or nihilistic stand (like Foucault), Giddens contends that moral critique needs some sort of rational justification even if it is not conclusive.[51] Other critics have dealt with the hermeneutic aspect of the theory of structuration. Zygmant Baumen, for instance, argues that Giddens' theory aspires to meet two objectives. First, to redefine the concept of structure as an external constraint, and second, to refute the random character of human action. But when redefining structure as rules and resources, Baumen claims, Giddens has not done much than reinforcing the idea he wants to deny, namely, structure as an external force "that determines action without being determined by it."[52] In addition, Bauman questions the way Giddens uses both notions; structure and action. He particularly notes that Giddens'

46- Held, D. & Thompson, J.B. Op. Cit. p. 7.

47- He certainly refers to the growing use of social media and their huge impact on social interaction in what came to be known as the «virtual world».

48- Held, D. & Thompson, J.B. Ibid. p. 8

49- Bernstein, R. «Social Theory as Critique» in Held, D. & Thompson, T.J. Op. Cit. pp 19-34

50- Held, D. & Thompson, J. B. Op. Cit, p 5.

51- Held, D. & Thompson, J. B. Op. Cit. p5.

52-Baumen Zygmant: «Hermeneutics and modern social theory» in Held & Thompson, Op. Cit. pp. 34-55.

emphasis of the actor as a major topic for sociological analysis is questionable. He argues that Giddens has gone too far in his endeavour to restore the notion of actor as a knowledgeable agent. In so doing, he lost insight of the much larger network of interdependencies in which the actor is an integral part. This leads Bauman to suggest a return to Elias' "figurational sociology" which rescues the notion of structure as regularity and stresses the notions of networks and interdependencies.[53]

Giddens' conception of structure as rules and resources has also been subject to severe critique from John, B. Thompson, who casts doubts on both the coherence and suitability of Giddens' proposal. He argues that it is not clear at all how "such notions of structure could be relevant to the analysis of differential access to institutions of higher education" for example.[54] Thompson claims that the key "notion of rule" in Giddens' proposal is rather ambiguous. He highlights the existence of too many rules in social life; rules of traffic, rules of thump, rules of etiquette, rules of grammar…etc. He even questions the underlying assumption that by describing the rules one is describing the structural features of social life as Giddens maintains. Moreover, he argues that this could be even counter productive insofar as diverting attention away from "some structural features which cannot be analysed in terms of rules."[55] The main source of Giddens' shortcomings concerning the notions of structure and rules, Thompson claims, is to be found in his reliance on linguistic conceptions of these notions as developed by various philosophers of language.[56]

Giddens has defended his position on this issue in a recent reply to his critics.[57] He points to various examples of rules and rule-guided activities in an attempt to reveal ways in which his theoretical constructions can be relevant to some classical issues of sociological analysis, such as differential access to education. Giddens particularly stresses the distinction between the notions of "structure" and "system," whereby the first refers to rules and resources, while the second deals with patterns of social relations across time and space. He, therefore, suggests that many points raised by his critics have to do with systems and their reproduction, rather than with his notion of structure. As for his reliance on linguistics, he defends that as a way of highlighting the "recursive character" of social reality, which means that structure is reproduced in, and by, the very practices which are organised by it. In this sense, one is rather inclined to say that Giddens is not far from suggesting a conception of structure which is self-generative similar to that of system in cybernetics.[58]

53- Ibid, p. 6

54- Thompson, J.B, «The theory of Structuration», in Held & Thompson. Op. Cit, pp 56-76

55- Ibid p. 58

56- Most prominent among them are Wittgenstein, Austin, de Saussure and Jack Derrida.

57- Giddens, A. «A reply to my critics» in Held & Thompson (eds), *Social Theory of Modern Societies*, Op .Cit pp. 249- 301

58- This is my own impression of Giddens› definition and use of the notion of structure.

Conclusion

The driving idea in this paper has been to show the specific character of the social sciences, both in terms of their object of investigation and their peculiar relationship to that object. I tried to show that, given such peculiar character of the science and its object, the naturalist conception or approach would not be a suitable instrument for acquiring knowledge on the social world. A number of ontological and epistemological limitations and shortcomings have been discussed.

The constructionist approach was suggested as a more appropriate way to analyse and interpret social realty in its multidimensional and complex character. Constructionism, as a broad and general approach, has emphasised the specific character of social sciences and acknowledges their unique relation to their object. The contributions of three prominent sociologists subscribing to this intellectual approach have been considered. They concede that social sciences are distinguished by reflexivity i.e., both the object of research and researchers are part of the problematic field of investigation and analysis.

The specific character of the social as an object for scientific investigation forces constructionist approaches to make use of the notion of historicity. This highlights the fact that actors (individuals and collectivities) and social activities are a product of specific historical conditions. The notion of historicity points to the importance of space and time intersections in the construction, deconstruction and transformation of the social world. Furthermore, it raises the issue of the relations between given / constructed environments of action (structures), on one hand, and motives, meanings and resources used by actors in their social interaction and daily life activities, on the other. Skills, meanings and resources used by actors are the product of the complex interplay between internal and external factors, between active agencies subjectively motivated and oriented, and objectively constructed structures in the outer world providing resources and imposing restrictions. Both internal and external conditions are formulated, transformed and transcended through a complex historical process of self realisation and self actualisation of actors and structures.

In this case, constructionism provides grounds for developing an interdisciplinary approach to studying social reality. It draws on various disciplines and makes use of their notions such as anthropology, history, social psychology and even geography. This can be seen in the use of general concepts and notions such as structure, action, historicity, space and time intersections…etc. Also, some specific notions like configuration and interdependency, developed by Elias, notions of structuration and agency, developed by Giddens, and notions of field, habitus and practical logic used, by Bourdieu, are concrete examples of interdisciplinary thinking and analysis proposed by different versions of the constructionist approach. These are key theoretical and methodological concepts and notions standing at the crossroads of various social sciences disciplines. They provide new and

imaginative solutions to old dilemmas faced by classical sociological theory.

Constructionism by attempting to bridge the gap between classic dichotomies such as, structure / action, objective / subjective, external / internal, provides a perfect example of interdisciplinary thinking in social sciences. It also makes a breakthrough in an area which has been in a stalemate for a long time.

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