

Soci(ologic)al Theory between Universalism and Cultural Relativism

The recent debate between Hans Joas and Nikolai Genov touches on some fundamental problems of contemporary theorizing in the field of the social sciences. With the breakdown of the integrative function of the Parsonian and Neo-Marxist world-views in the sixties and seventies and the emergence of a variety of "minor" discourses like post-structuralism, feminism and postmodernism, and the emphasis on specific cultural traditions of knowledge, international sociology has re-entered a stage which already marked the intellectual debates in European social thought between 1890 and 1933. The renaissance of historicism and cultural relativism in the present, therefore, represents a lasting experience of modernity, which can only be abandoned at the price of reintroducing new kinds of ideological fundamentalism that should be more characteristic of religious movements than a scientific activity. Nevertheless, the desire for a *mathesis universalis* and a *universal grammar* can be seen as a constant motive in European intellectual history, since the collapse of a coherent system of cultural integration in the Reformation, to control and channel that multitude of intellectual and scientific discourse that Genov characterizes as "subjectivistic" and "literary".

Indeed, the present "state of the art" in social and sociological theory seems to be more like that of an "aesthetic culture", than a monolithic ethical or religious oriented life-style, as Kierkegaard described this antagonism 150 years ago. Where is the problem? The insistence on the fundamental relativism and perspectivism of all forms of social knowledge does not exclude the possibility of an international reception and "translation" of a specific cultural tradition. In this sense the contemporary world-wide infiltration of such German "master-thinkers" as Nietzsche, Freud, Simmel, Max Weber and Heidegger, is more than striking.

Does there not actually exist a new kind of "cultural synthesis" which nowadays is no longer based on the primacy of the thinking of Hegel, Marx and the young Wittgenstein, as was the case 25 years ago, but on that of the successors, as described by Lucás in his unfortunate study "The Destruction of Reason"?

Perhaps the main problem in the future will be that these theoretical differences are in principle not dispensable in favour of "objectified universal statements" and "empirically testable explanatory statements". Because the question of what is to be proved empirically itself depends on our theoretical and methodological presuppositions, as the Neo-Kantian tradition in the humanities and quantum mechanics in physics have demonstrated. The penetrating critique made by modern feminism and the sociologists of the "Third World" against the basic features of "occidental rationalism" seems to be a further argument in this direction. All that a social and sociological theory can do in this situation is to analyze this present "state of art" in order to reflect upon its own capacities for genuine sociological "enlightenment" and a "diagnosis of time". This is something which takes into account the insights of those discourses on and experiences of "modernity" described in a variety of contemporary theorizing in philosophy, the natural sciences, aesthetics and cultural studies. Perhaps then the lack of an "integrated sociological theory" may well reopen the interdisciplinary dialogue that modern social theory so often has fruitfully undertaken.

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