Jens Tonboe

Introduction:

Aims and aspirations of the Sociology Programme at Aalborg University

Behind the new sociology programme in Aalborg is seen a growing interest for sociology in Denmark, which, again, is seen as a sign of a 'moral turn' in society. This social development has affected sociology as well - towards a growing interest in agency, micro perspectives and qualitative methods and away from structure, quantitative methods - and political issues of former times. How do we strike a new balance in the discipline as a whole to match 'a new society'?

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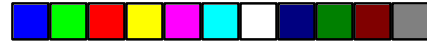
1. Background

In 1988 the University of Aalborg applied to the Ministry of Education for a programme in sociology. The application was declined - primarily because the process of establishing a new programme and department in sociology at the University of Copenhagen to replace the one that was closed down by the Ministry of Education appeared to be more difficult than expected. Neither the ministry, nor we, wanted to take steps that could derail this delicate process in Copenhagen. However, through this application we did manage, as a kind of 'compensation', to hold on to our programme in General Social Science - originally aimed to train teachers for the secondary school - provided we could, amongst other things, "turn it in a more sociological direction". This led, from 1990, to a new one-year specialisation in Sociological Analysis at the graduate level.

In May 1996, when the new programme and department of sociology at the University of Copenhagen was well established, we applied for sociology again. The application was fully supported - internally, in the University, by every one from the students and departments to the Dean and Chancellor - and externally by the Danish Sociological Association and representatives from other universities and research institutions, including the Sociology Department in Copenhagen. Such unity was quite unheard of, given the last 20 years of experience of Danish sociologists.

The Ministry of Education and various advisory boards reacted promptly, and positively, and on November 6, 1996, we were granted permission to admit up to 50 new students already the following year for a full bachelor's and master's programme in sociology. A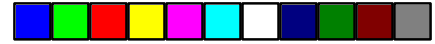t the same time we worked with the Copenhagen department to revise the existing statutory regulation to suit the interests of both universities, and this was also approved by the ministry, by August 1997. Finally, by September 1st, 1997, we had plenty of applications from students to fill the programme. Many of them are present at this conference - and they are the real reason for this discussion on the Sociology of the Future and the Future of Sociology!

Such a positive course of events, involving so many, often conflicting parties, but now with outspoken support and interest and high expectations, from inside and outside the university, from colleagues and, not least, enthusiastic and able students, has been a special motivating experience. It serves as a reservoir of 'secret resources' for those of us responsible for the planning and implementation of the programme, now that we gradually encounter all the problems and constantly try to see them as challenges and possibilities.

More than anything, we see this as another sign of a surging interest in sociology, in this country at least. We see this also reflected in the serious part of the Danish press and public debate. Sociologists - stars and amateurs alike - are increasingly cast in the role of oracular wise men in which we previously saw mainly economists appear. It is crucial for us, and for Danish sociology as a whole, to respond adequately to this interest, and, not least, to the reasons behind it (as we must say as good sociologists) through what we do in our teaching and research. It was to help us to find out how, that we summoned the conference and invited these distinguished guests - all of whom previously visited the University of Aalborg.

2. Why this quest for sociology?

The common denominator for this de-

bate is 'ethics', philosophically speaking, or 'morality' and collective representation as the classical Durkheimian tradition would have it, or rather: it is the *lack* of ethics and morality, or, to be even more precise: the *increasing* lack of ethics and morality, since it is clearly coupled with increasing anxiety and discontent. I see this 'moral turn' in society as a two-fold, or rather as a double-sided, expression.

On the one hand, the existing morality seems to be coming apart, or it is no longer sufficient as the only collective representation (if it ever was) to match the increasing differentiation and individualisation of functions, cultures, ways of life, life strategies etc. in society. Differentiation has become, at best, a matter of differentiated morality as well, a matter of individual choice, of 'reason' and negotiation, of 'differentiated reflexivity'. This is very much the perspective in which we discuss crime, violence, prejudices, immigrants, egoism, community, pollution and environmentalism, looking for 'moral solutions' to reduce problems, threats and contingencies.

On the other hand, these very discussions are also signs of a more authoritarian and intolerant turn, a call for more 'responsible' and 'ethical' behavior, a re-awakening of 'moral conscience' as such, just as much as it reflects actual changes and actual phenomena in 'real life'. Insofar as it is often a matter of 'empty' or 'constructed' legitimating claims only, it is an aspect of what I call 'the counterfactual process of norm-creation' (Tonboe 1997).

Whether one thing or the other, we definitely are experiencing a public interest and a public debate on 'risk society' in general. There seems to be a surging unrest of anxiety, insecurity, even fear, dread and aggression - despite all continued material progress, increased consumption, growing employment and waning unemployment, continued resistance to economic polarisation etc. in the Danish welfare state (Goul Andersen 1996, Tonboe 1998).

We see, as sociologists, the anxiety behind the issues debated - and encounter questsions on how to boost morality and civic virtues, as well as socialisation and education - and punishments - in order to integrate 'the marginalised', as suggested solutions. And we see escalated 'marginalisation' of the designated problems, 'problem groups and -individuals', as an inevitable consequence of this process itself, as a construction of 'reality'.

The personal, the private, the 'self' - the acting individual and its positive experiences - in short *micro* - seems to be the focal point and the starting point of all this. Distant, even global phenomenas are personalised and privatised and seen in that perspective primarily - like the war in ex-Yugoslavia, whose victims are brought home, in effect, instantly through uncensored TV, like natural catastrophes illustrated well enough and close enough to engage us, like British beef.... Or is it rather that more and more distant events now affect us instantly, personally and directly, and only therefore do we pay attention and react? Perhaps we have relatives or acquaintancies in the UN forces, we sense the thin ozone layer and the radioactive cloud over Scandinavia, or we have - who knows - British beef in the refrigerator, or in the burger we just ate at McDonalds - all fine illustrations of the term 'glocalisation', which Zygmunt Bauman uses to signify the essence of globalisation-internationalisation (see Bauman forthcoming). How much is real, and how much are 'just' a new reaction to 'the same' in this process of 'revalorising'
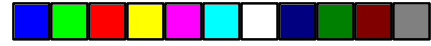
of the individual and the pursuit of happiness in a society of freedom and multiplicity?

But why is 'micro' also seen as the *solution* to our individual anxiety? Is it because of 'the moral turn'? But then, morality is certainly not only an individual matter. Do we face an all-embracing individualisation and depolitisation of society, a postmodern freedom-and-happiness society instead of the former order-and-security society, as Bauman has recently suggested (1997), for 'real reasons', or just out of ignorance and imagination, and lack of imagination? Think of the much more politicised debate in society, and sociology, only 15 years ago. Problems of distribution and injustice needed structural solutions, nationally and internationally. A micro-debate on so-called 'epiphenomena' was illegitimate, if not unthinkable! Or is it perhaps that material and structural problems - order and security in general - are better taken care of now, so much that it has become part of the common sense daily life we take for granted? Do we demand even more order and compliance from 'the others', especially 'the strangers', in order to be, or to feel, more free and happy ourselves? Does a structural solution mean adaption of only one structure, and only one order at the same time - *the* order?

Anyway, sociologists who can respond readily and meaningfully to the contemporary discourse experience increasing popularity *as sociologists* - in competition with anthropologists, ethnologists, psychologists etc. And this is new in a Danish context.

We must not turn our backs on this depoliticised, re-professionalised debate and this quest for 'a new sociology' nor discard it by 'analysing it away' as a runaway individualism.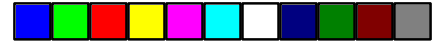 However, we need to consider our answers in teaching, research and the public debate thoroughly before we act. We need to analyse 'the moral turn' and the mechanisms behind it before we get caught and structured by it, and washed away.

3. Blind alleys, and alternatives

In fact, sociology, as a university discipline, and social science in general, have already reacted to these trends for some time - in various ways, some of which, unfortunately, without much thinking. Student preferences - usually the best heralds - for 'micro' and 'agency' rather than 'macro' and 'structure' are obvious, as is the same trend in many journals and reading lists, especially the 'best-sellers'. We, the teachers, adapt seminars and curriculas regularly in this direction. Popular topics only five to ten years ago - on class, on the labour market, on unemployment, on women, even on the welfare state - are now hard to sell. 'Identity', 'risk', and 'everyday life' are well received. 'Class' is seen as a matter of social heritage, mobility and life strategy, feminism as a matter of gender, family, career and positive discrimination.

In addition, historical perspectives and 'grand theory' of modernity, postmodernity and risk society, as 'frames of reference' for the individual in rather philosophical and normative terms - the so-called theoretical theory - are gaining momentum - and losing empirical, and real, substance at the same time. There is a definite 'metaphysical turn' going on as well.

A parallel trend in methods is obvious also. Epistemology is more or less out - except e.g. with Bourdieu, who thus turns even more epistemological (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996). So-called quantitative methods, data and analysis are often seen as a nuisance - if not as tabooed positivism. 'Qualitative me-

thods', especially 'phenomenological interviews' and 'case studies', are popular titles and courses.
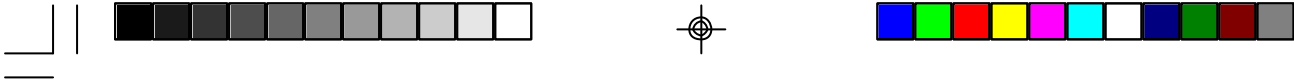
I think that we should meet these demands for micro, metaphysical, and qualitative approaches constructively, by insisting on micro in a macro perspective (and vice versa), the qualitative in a quantitative perspective, the normative and metaphysical in an empirical perspective, as well as the private, the local and the cultural in a structural and global perspective. We must bridge the polarisation between the personal-individual and the global. A balance of higher order must be established to meet this new situation. This is quite a demanding strategy, involving new thinking, new theory and new epistemology. 'A new society needs a new sociology', we hear more often than we see. But this is actually what we are trying to do - and why we need some help! If Durkheim and Comte in 19th century France faced a problem of social order and collective conscience, so do modern sociologists today, in our own way and for other reasons. This time, however, we should not focus so much on a solution-oriented, tool-producing science to create that order in reality. It is always important to deal with important social problems and phenomena of the day - to describe, to understand, and to explain, even to suggest solutions and follow up in practice. And often this approach combines conveniently a need for resources with a need for manifestation and legitimation. But to do so effectively, and persistently, we must be able to predict what tomorrow's problems and phenomenas will be. 'Relevant research' needs planning and time because it requires a deepened understanding of a changing world; teaching - or producing able candidates to do the job - even more so. Both take a broader theo-

retical frame of reference - a structured sociological imagination. We need to construct a field of sociological knowledge in which we can locate and predict not only what the public will see as important and relevant issues in society, but also what they *ought* to see as important, from their own position, situation and interests, but somehow fail to. The social world is highly opaque, even to sociologists. We thus need to go beyond both the private, the public and the sociological imagination.

We also need to realise that solutions to 'social problems' do not necessarily demand practical action from anyone. Just as often it is a matter of knowledge and understanding, or rather of *broader* knowledge and *deeper* understanding, a matter of relating new concepts and conceptions, and transmitting this from sociology to society in a reflexive dialogue. There is a vast sociological deficit to fill, at least in this country. Much of the anxiety and insecurity - as well as much of the violence and threat - that people experience today, making them define specific problems and suggest specific solutions from their own perspectives, only to perpetuate a vicious circle, belong to the category of consciousness and misinformed inclinations rather than the category of 'real world' necessity. Hopefully, we may, avoid much of this if we can provide this 'confused individualism' with a clarifying picture of the actual 'glocal' social reality that will permit people to produce, to change or to recreate that reality on a more solid basis.

4. Resources at hand

I think we have a good platform for accomplishing this in the resources and experience we already have in sociology and related fields at Aalborg University: a staff that is well integrated in three

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cross-disciplinary departments with a gravity point in the Department of Social Relations and Organisation, consisting eight to ten senior and junior teacher-researchers, some of whoom have more than 15 years of experience in fields such as the sociology of education, gender studies, social policy and social work, urban sociology, political sociology and the welfare state, labour market, theory and methods etc.

Also, the way we organise our teaching programmes is an asset in achieving this goal: gradual specialisation, problem-oriented project work in most semesters within various generally defined themes to be specified by the students themselves, combined with courses and exercises - the programme brings us in close contact with the practice, the problems and the debates in the world around us. And it mobilises the activity and influence of the students, who then confronts the faculty staff with the order of the day in dynamic interplay. Although we are talking of a new programme, we are in the fortunate position of having several very able senior students involved in planning for the new generation - who will soon take over for themselves. Also the preliminary plan we have drawn up for the bachelor study and the outlines for the master's degree soon to be specified are promising - we think (see the Appendix in this issue on "The plan of study" for more details).

5. Yet to be done

However, we are also aware that we have shortcomings, holes and blank spots, as well as unsolved problems. We are still a small community in a peripheral region. We have yet much planning and implementation to do, budgets to fight for, staff to hire, new research teams to establish, PhD-programmes to implement etc. We can, however, lean on already existing studies and programmes in the faculty of social science for some time. And certainly the cross-disciplinary and cross-departmental way we organise things in Aalborg gives us a head start. But we need to make our own way and own room in order to give back our own input to our partners.

Also, we will co-operate with the Sociology Department in Copenhagen, but selectively and from our own platform - in order to contribute to broader and more vigorous Danish sociology as a whole. And, increasingly, the spirit of co-operation will be accompanied by a spirit of healthy competition, which we must prepare for.

We need new ideas, input and critique - now and in the future. Changes are still possible the next two or three years before our visions ossify in statutes, and administration and inertia take over until, having produced the first generation (five years), we must revise again.

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