



Disciplinary boundaries in the sociological examination of modes of human symbioses

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Abstract— Today, researches conducted within the discipline of sociology seems to have a relatively analogous vision on the quality of being of human nature and collective existence and, as a consequence, on social reality. In this paper, we will try to show that the concept of social reality is far from being universally valid as a generalization of human coexistences at the macro level, and that the understanding of the object of sociology require addressing the totality of the modes of human symbioses, many of them possessing collective qualities currently outside the scope of social sciences. The proposed solution is the reconstruction of the disciplinary characteristics of sociology in terms of an imaginative narrative, where theological explications of society belongs to the same narrative category as mainstream frame of analyses bound by a modernist ontology and epistemology.

Keywords- social theory; critical theory; sociological imagination; macro-level researches; disciplinarity

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a basic requirement for theories aspiring to the appellation “sociological” to be able to explain social reality, that is, to be capable of establishing or discovering human relationships among the various components and segments of a special type of human coexistence. The starting point of this paper is the hypothesis that human symbiosis is a broader category than social coexistence because it includes collective qualities outside the bonds of “social”. Accordingly, we cannot regard social reality, which is the object of sociology, as either a unique or a universal collective reality, and therefore, certain reservations can be formulated against sociology; namely, in its current disciplinary form it is unable to interpret adequately all components and segments of human coexistence.

II. SOCIETY AND THE VARIOUS MODES OF HUMAN SYMBIOSIS

Society in a universal sense and the problematic nature of social reality is worth examining because based on the guidelines of conceptual clarity; it is a requirement in science that different phenomena or their groups must not be

categorised under the same name. The examination of stratifications or groups inside a society can greatly help this clarification, as it can bring to the surface characteristics having class-creating power and thus it can account for refining the term “society” by increasing the number of its distinctive features. This approach can be justified by two attempts of reconceptualisation, following two structurally different trains of thought, on the field of social research.

A. Multiple Societies

One of these conceptual approaches states as a starting point that an increase in the distinctive features opens the door to a dual or multiple social structure. This makes it possible to think about multiple disparate societies in a given geographical or political space which are however, in some way related to each other and consequently, if certain conditions are met, are permeable to the members of the other. In Hungarian context, Ferenc Erdei and László Németh were the first to speak on a conference in Szárszó in 1943 about a modern Hungarian society being composed of separate societies: Erdei in his lecture spoke about “two social systems”, within which a historical noble-national and a modern civil society [1], and Németh about a duality where Hungarians sink to the fate of indigenous people as a result of the activities of foreign colonisers [2]. As an example of taking the dual social structure further is Iván Szelényi's two-triangle model, where Hungarian society is modelled by two partly-overlapping triangles, one signifying the social structure inside the public sector, on the top of which is the Kadarian political elite; while the other stands for the social structure based on the “second economy”, on top of which we can find the new entrepreneurial class [3]. It also seems unavoidable to conceptualise several societies inside a political unity when modern colonial empires are being examined in international sociology, as the integration of formerly independent political spaces and the societies belonging to them, provided it takes place at all, requires several lifetimes. We meet similar situations during the examination of various social or gender inequalities and ethnic conflicts, and we can also take some forms of globalisation as a possible contributor to the fragmentation of a society inside a single country, as an example, into virtually separate “rural” and “urban” societies.

B. Multiple modes of symbiosis

The main characteristic of the other conceptual approach, as an opposite of the one described above, is the inverse relationship between the increase of distinctive features and the degree of tenability of a universal validity. The distinction between *societas* and *universitas*, which was present in Roman Law, was revived by Otto von Gierke and Louis Dumont: For the former, *societas* referred to a free association of individuals where the collective identity came from the individual in such a way that the individual preserved its distinct status inside the community. By contrast, *universitas* means a "body" existing in and of itself and through participation it provides a common identity to various individuals. The fact that the two organisational forms have become indistinguishable by the age of modernity, according to Gierke's line of argument, is due to the enlightened natural law. According to the results of the conceptual analysis employed by him, natural law had a pioneering role in the reduction of *universitas* to *societas* by interpreting the (sum of) modes of human coexistence with the modern logic of individualism, instead of the traditional logic of the organic whole [4, p.95]. Dumont approaches the difference from the opposite direction. According to his hypothesis, society together with its institutions, values, concepts and language has a priority, in a sociological sense, over the individuals constituting it, and the latter become human beings only by their acculturation into society and by the society modelling them. Thus, *societas* is not a result of a reduction but it is a mode of coexistence having a general validity and providing identity, and based on the scope of its meaning, it would be more accurate to use *universitas* in place of *societas* to designate society as a whole [5, p.30]. We should also mention some Hungarian contributions to this approach, mainly in the works of Csaba Vass [6,7] and László Bogár [8] where society, as a coexistence characterized by a special quality of being, is placed and examined in the context of an onto-social structure of various modes of human symbiosis.¹

III. NON-SOCIAL TYPES OF HUMAN SYMBIOSES ON MACRO LEVEL

Naturally, objections can be raised against the current validity of both Gierke and Dumont's argumentation. Although Gierke's thoughts may be true about Roman society, it is not necessary for the reduced entity to replace the original on the level of social organisation but they can work in parallel. One can argue against Dumont's attempt at universalisation the way for example Colingwood does, namely, a "universal society", although intellectually inseparable from particular societies, cannot be realised currently [9]. The essential difference, however, can rather be observed in the fact that

¹ The concept of „modes of human symbiosis" first appeared in the aforementioned writings of Csaba Vass, and the usage of the concept by the author draw extensively on that background.

“universal” and “social” refer to organisations of different nature. That is, the scientific concept of a “universal society” is problematic because the concept of society—as numerous studies on the phylogeny of the concepts “société”, “social”, “sociabilité” etc. have pointed out [10, 11, 12, 13]—signify an exclusively human association, and the scientific examination of society also refers to the examination of exclusively human associations. Accordingly, the examination of the complexity of societies can be carried out as the examination of the complexity of one special mode of human symbiosis, which are based on special principles, by examining its location and operation inside the structure of the various modes of human symbiosis.

We shall start dealing with the complexity of modes of human symbiosis with the examination of the question whether there exist at all macro-forms of collective coexistence which are different in nature from society. Here, I am not referring to a distinction between community and society proposed by Tönnies [14], but to the one that can be made between a sacred community and a profane society. The fact that human coexistence is possible outside the bounds of society seems self-evident for us seeing that the examination of exclusion from and integration into society—which are mainstream topics of some sociological researches too—cannot avoid addressing the question “Where do individuals go when they are driven out from society?” and “Where do those come from who want to get integrated into society?”. Quite obviously, this location is not equal to void, and those are rather isolated phenomena when it is natural reality, such as in case of feral children and castaways. This train of thought, however, does not, in itself, support a statement that it is possible for such “societal outsiders” to participate in a collective with a nature fundamentally different from society in general, and specifically from particular societies; that is, there is no reason yet for why it is not sufficient to speak simply about other societies or other types of social formations. The support for this argument is better to look for as differences between modes of human symbiosis. Modes of symbiosis based on universal god-centered organisation principles, which include not only human-human but also god-human coexistence—or, in non-theistic worldviews, coexistence with transcendent entities—and also a coexistence with the divine and with the created world, are significantly different from modes of symbiosis including humans exclusively. For this reason, instead of speaking about various types of societies, I regard it more accurate as a starting point of my analysis to use the category “society” for modes of human symbiosis based on non-god-centered organisational principles, whereas, for other modes, based on god-centered organisational principles the term “communion” seems more appropriate, or in a more general sense—seeing the exclusively Christian nature of the term—, “sacral community”. Inside these two main categories, several other subcategories can be defined with fairly good accuracy, which now, for reasons of scope, I will only enumerate. Along god-centered organisational principles, community-organisations of traditional religions can develop,

namely —borrowing the terms from corresponding models in History of Religions—, various animistic, totemistic, and theistic sacral communities. Along non-god-based organisational principles, various materialistic societies can be described, for example, economy-based systems, such as modern capitalist or bureaucratic collectivist societies, and power-centered systems like “American”, “European”, or “Asian” globalism.

IV. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The basic question for sociology is how it can grasp the relationship between the modes of symbiosis outlined above. Sociology has indisputable merits and unquestionable legitimacy in describing and explaining western-type godless modes of coexistence. The same attributes, however, can be questioned in cases when it targets god-centered modes of coexistence or transitory states between god-based and non-god-based modes of coexistence. As Fustel de Coulanges argues in a classical text of sociology,

„We shall attempt to set in a clear light the radical and essential differences which at all times distinguished these ancient peoples from modern societies. (...) We have some difficulty in considering them as foreign nations; it is almost always ourselves that we see in them. Hence spring many errors. We rarely fail to deceive ourselves regarding these ancient nations when we see them through the opinions and facts of our own time.” [15, p.5]

It can be added that contemporary god-centered modes of human coexistence show more similarity —at least in respect of the God-principle— to certain patterns of coexistence of ancient peoples than to modern society (e.g. considering their organizing principle, contemporary types of Christian communities are still closer to medieval Christian communities than to society). A general characteristic of sociology, however, is that it addresses the role of existential aspects of transcendence in the formation of a relationship between the individual and the community within the framework of a specific modernist-humanist reasoning. This has the purpose of translating transcendental truths into secularised forms of universalised moral arguments, which started with Parsons and reached its peak with Habermas [16 p.90]. However, it should be noted that there are also sociological debates over transcendence having a content much closer to religious teachings. Jaspers’s existentialist conception of transcendence and ‘limit-experience’, as well as Eisenstadt’s application of the idea of transcendence as a tool of systematic comparative analysis applicable to both past and present civilizations stands in clear continuity with directions of inquiry opened up by Alfred Weber and Georg Simmel. These directions lead towards the examination of the relevance of Western conceptions of transcendence to a sociological reevaluation of Christian claims, the concept of

life and the meaning of absolute value orientations from the standpoint of historical immanence [17 p.89, 18 p.269]. However, unlike the mainstream evolutionary-functional paradigm, the latter are said to be in the fringe of academic social theory [19, p.83].

The same trend can be observed in the case of transitions from a God-based sacral community to a non-God based society. Here, key concepts of sociological thinking like “disenchantment of the world” [20], “privatization” [21], “generalisation” [22] “societalization” [23] and “pluralisation” [24] are based on and/or are verified by empirical observations and have nothing to do with and have no reference to revealed truth. And while it is certainly not a criteria for a sociological theory about society to draw on revealed truth or to be coherent with it, it is not a criteria either to trace back factual statements about the world to empirical observations: As an example, the work of Walter Benjamin and Gregor McLennan (and generally of other social scientists belonging to the constructivist trend) is categorised as sociology and they as sociologists even if neither of them had ever done “empirical” research in the same sense as the activity of the Chicago school, which still counts as a benchmark in this area. Moreover, Mills goes to the point in his pivotal work, *The Sociological Imagination*, that the search for a meaning of social reality—to translate the personal troubles of a milieu into the public issues of social structure [25]—is not a privilege of a special episteme or sciences but of the human being. As a result of this, values are involved in all aspects of sociological work. This characteristic of sociological imagination is also fairly apparent in public sociology, which, in an attempt to become a “mirror and conscience of society” [26, quoting Burawoy on p.113], has to admit that „*whilst some professional sociologists may claim a monopoly on the right to speak truthfully in the name of society, they are not the only people who investigate, analyse, theorise and give voice to worldly phenomena from a ‘social’ point of view.*” [27, p. 531]. As—according to an article in the 2010 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*— currently only 2% of the population of the world is atheist and 9.6% non-religious [28], it is quite improbable that religious values have insignificant role among the values underlying “sociological imagination”.

Academic sociology, however, seems to be a repository of those professional forms of sociological imagination which give an atheological interpretation of social reality. Interestingly, the requirement of empirical foundations does not have the same exclusivity, as we have demonstrated, as there are some thinkers and trends which are accepted and legitimised by academic sociology even in the absence of any empirical research. This suggests that in certain situations and within certain limits, it is a characteristic of sociology that it can review the rules governing its operation, and belonging to the modern episteme. It does not go the point, however, where it would have to make a subject of consideration the modification of its disciplinary characteristics in terms of an

imaginative narrative—by which, in my opinion, it would allow the integration of theological explications of society to sociological sciences as an useful supplement to, or an alternative of atheological explanations of society. This would be necessary to protect ourselves from the bias predicted by Coulanges. On the other hand, if we want to approach god-based modes of coexistence and their changes on their own terms and starting from their most elemental components, we will have a strong need for theological explications when examining the full complexity of modes of human symbioses. If we manage to employ these various approaches in sociology without any geographical, political, religious or ideological discrimination —*sine ira et studio*—, it will help develop real pluralist dialogues, the lack of which is not only harmful to mutual intercultural understanding but at the same time emerge as a barrier before the creation of a truly comprehensible and therefore globally acceptable sociology.

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