Philosophy of Sociology: Living Philosophy in Contemporary Times

WHAT DO WE DO IN ORDER TO EXIST AS A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY?

TBA (Most likely May 2020)

When we talk, as we did in the last session, about the world of both inanimate objects and subjective beings that are alive, we come to one of the oldest concepts in philosophy – a collective as an organism. As organisms we do not want to die, and this is true as well in the abstract understanding of how we live together. We wish to sustain life…together.

THE ESSAY

(The works listed are not a complete coverage of the contemporary field but to provide the best known and most significant in contemporary discussions. Apologies if anything important has been missed)

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JUST A BRIEFING PAPER

A focus on four sociologists helps to see where the contemporary sociological debates are situated (alphabetical order): Randell Collins, Jürgen Habermas (pronounced), Charles Taylor, and Slavoj Žižek (pronounced).

The main focus of my own work extensively draws from Randell Collins. I am familiar with Jürgen Habermas, and Charles Taylor. I am not familiar with the Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek. Before we start an important cravat has to be explained about the title of the Meet-Up, "Philosophies of Sociology or Sociology of Philosophies". The title does refer to the old debate from the challenge of the strong programme or strong sociology which is a variety of the sociology of scientific knowledge, and is found in the work of David Bloor, Barry Barnes, Harry Collins, Donald A. MacKenzie, and John Henry. I deliberately propose the question, not because I want to go in this direction, which is a philosophy of science concern that is not helpful, but because it a call to respect the language rules of the two disciplines, philosophy and sociology. Often the conflation or misunderstanding is translating between the two disciplines.

Randell Collins (1998) is extraordinary survey in historical sociology, across global civilisations. His central concept or term is 'concept network'. In philosophy, it is 'concept

analysis'. What Collins has done is use concept mapping for a sociological model. To quote one reviewer:[1]

> Collins virgorously rejects reductionist strategies and claims that 'orientation towards truth' is an independent condition that structures segments of the social, just as an orientation towards profit, power, or beauty would condition other fields. Not that he denies the impact of the 'external' in the formation of ideas; rather, he understands the task of giving the worldwide phenomena of philosophical schools a proper sociological place.

Collins's axiom of general cultural theory is called 'interaction rituals' or 'interaction rituals chains', identifying kinds of social bonds that relate macrostructures of society (the rituals) to the interactive micro-encounters of individuals. Collins says that the specific interaction rituals of intellectuals are related to their sacred 'truth'. Wolfgang Krohn (1999) summarizes the model very well:[2]

> Philosophers are engaged in mutually reinforcing decontextualized, universalistic, abstract, and transcendental truth claims as their symbols – including, of course, symbols of nominalistic, relativistic, and situational truth claims. These symbols are loaded with 'membership significance' and generate 'emotional energy' fueling enthusiasm and confidence. The content of the symbols – ideas – is a group's 'cultural capital,' which can be invested in controversies that yield payoffs for many generations (e.g., the concept of the Platonic idea). Intellectual creativity is driven by a recurrent competition for cultural attention space. On the basis of empirical evidence, Collins formulates a law of small numbers (p. 81 f.), according to which partitioning the attention space allows for no fewer than three and no more than six competing coexisting schools.

The reference to 'space' and to 'school' is where Collins produces various concept mappings in the historical survey of the sociology. The rest of Collins's work goes to more detail of the different elements in the global theory and with its application in different settings. Randell Collins (1999) explores the accomplishments of the golden age of 'macrohistory', the sociologically informed analysis of long-term patterns of political, economic, and social

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[1] Wolfgang Krohn (1999). (book review) The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change by Randall Collins, *Isis*, 90 (4), 857.
[2] Wolfgang Krohn (1999). 858

change that has reached new heights of sophistication in the last decades of the twentieth century. This includes the Marxian-inspired theory of revolutions and the shift to a state-breakdown model. In the latter model, revolutions start at the top in the fiscal strains of the state, rather than bubbling up from discontent below. Collins linked revolutions to military-centered transformations of the state, and famously had predicted, in the early 1980s, the breakdown of the Soviet empire.

Randell Collins (2004) goes into greater detail on the concept of 'Interaction Ritual Chains' from his earlier work in concept mapping. Collins proposes, as a 'radical micro-sociology', that successful rituals create symbols of group membership and pump up individuals with emotional energy, while failed rituals drain emotional energy. Each person flows from situation to situation, drawn to those interactions where their cultural capital gives them the best emotional energy payoff. Thinking here can be explained by the internalization of conversations within the flow of situations; individual selves are thoroughly and continually social, constructed from the outside in. It is what philosopher Earnest Sosa advocates as external reasoning, but it is compatible with Bernard William's concept of 'internal reasoning' in values thinking. Randell Collins (2008) takes a case study of the sociological theme of violence. Collins challenges popular misconception fostered by blockbuster action movies and best-selling thrillers, well as conventional explanations by social scientists on conditions of poverty, racial or ideological hatreds, or family pathologies. Collins argues that violent confrontation goes against human physiological hardwiring. He shows how violence can be triggered only when pathways around an emotional barrier are presented. The psychology, which Collins is adapting for the purpose of the sociological model, explains why violence typically comes in the form of atrocities against the weak, ritualized exhibitions before audiences, or clandestine acts of terrorism and murder; and why a small number of individuals are competent at violence.

Jürgen Habermas (1973) first introduced the concept of the 'legitimation crisis', although it has a history going back to Plato's Republic. The concept is the decline in the confidence of administrative functions, institutions, or leadership, but Habermas expanded it to a view that an institution or organization does not have the administrative capabilities to maintain or establish structures effective in achieving their end goals. In order resolve the negativity of the situation, Habermas (1981) developed the 'Theory of Communicative Action'. The theory begins in a concept of communicative rationality, reason which is not grounded in instrumental or objectivistic terms, but rather in an emancipatory communicative act. Habermas proposes "human action and understanding can be fruitfully analysed as having a linguistic structure", and each utterance relies upon the anticipation of freedom from unnecessary domination. These linguistic structures of communication can be used to establish a normative understanding of society.

Jürgen Habermas (1985) gets the 'postmodern' tag in his critique of modern reason and the Enlightenment 'project'. However he draws on a wide range of paradigms with greater subtlety: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche, including the work of 20th century philosophers Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Cornelius Castoriadis and Niklas Luhmann. What often gets misunderstood is that his critique is aimed at the 'cultural self-understanding of modernity' rather than a person's 'discovery' in the rational or enlighten process. The problem is the 'historical context of Western rationalism' and the attempt to revive that past historical condition. What has been missed in this return to the past is the process of disenchantment and alienation from the German romantics onwards, and that literature reveals the problem in reviving "historical objectification of rational structures". Note that Habermas is referring to the objectification, and not abandoning rational structures. His concern is to offset the negativity of the objectification with the 'principle of subjectivity', the notion of individual autonomy as the essence of man, which we get from Hegel. So Habermas' concern is that we should not lose sight of the 'cultural impulse of modernity', however, he also rejects the radical postmodernist stance in abandoning the project of modernity as a whole. Those who take either radical or reactionary stance have ignored the emancipatory dimension of the European Enlightenment, and thereby renounced the means of developing a consistent and immanent critique of modernity.

Charles Taylor (1989) is concerned to "articulate and write a history of the modern identity … what it is to be a human agent: the senses of inwardness, freedom, individuality, and being embedded in nature which are at home in the modern West". Much of this earlier work of Taylor is moral theory. The good is a matter of human valuation and that is one important source of personal identity. Taylor also claims 'inwardness' as another source. I would align this with Bernard William's concept of internal reasoning, however, for Taylor it is a spiritual dimension. The mind is immaterial and rational, which could be described as 'spirit' or it could be described abstractly in other ways. For the sociology what Taylor argues is that the sources of 'self' is the affirmation of ordinary life. This early work goes onto other themes for a view of naturalism, an understanding of language, and untangling the conflicts of modernity.

Much of what Taylor (1992) is saying holds to a common existentialist worldview, including Taylor's own Christian (Catholic) grounding, as well as the 'opposition' views in non-Christian stances, or a post-Christian compatiblist stance. This goes to what Taylor calls the 'ethics of authenticity'. His argument, however, is that there is a modern misunderstanding of the ethic, a view of self-fulfilment which seems to render ineffective the whole tradition

of common values and social commitment. Taylor believes we should sorts out the good from the harmful in the modern cultivation of an authentic self. He provides a critique of simplistic, one-sided judgments of modern culture, which is preoccupied with expression, rights, and the subjectivity of human thought and fails to see that these valuations are also liabilities. Charles Taylor (2007) provides an understanding of secularism or secularisation which highly nuanced and it is commonly difficult to understand the exact argument. The reason is that Taylor offers both a very general sweep and an *ad hoc* approach in the historical sociology. However, the core argument can be said to be that there are three modes of secularity to be distinguished: 1) secularized public spaces; 2) the decline of belief and practice; and 3) the cultural conditions where unbelief in religion is a viable option. Taylor, I believe, is merely making space for the spiritual dimension in the sociology, and that would seem a fair proposition in the vague meaning of the 'spirituality'. Taylor also returns to his earlier work (1989) to affirm the place of the individual in society.

Slavoj Žižek (1989) examined the Kantian notion of the sublime in order to liken ideology to the experience of something that is absolutely vast and powerful beyond all perception and objective intelligibility. The work incorporates the sociology from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, and produces an ideologically-framed, psychoanalytical, sociological interpretation, which, however, opposes a simplistic reading of 'forms' of commodities (Marx) and dreams (Freud). Where I find Žižek (2010) more helpful, sociologically, is his critique of apocalyptic thinking from New Age obscurantism to violent religious fundamentalism. The work is more that of a literary critic, but its sociological import is that demonstrates the stages of ideological avoidance and political protest in the cultural and political forms.

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