

The social sciences and sociology in particular have entered a phase of massive change: they are emerging from the classical era – a process which many of us consider began at the beginning of the 1960s or the 1970s.

Evidence of this change – even if somewhat superficial – is the increase in the number of sociologists, or departments or institutions specializing in our subject throughout the world, although we do also observe difficulties, or challenges to the usefulness of our contribution and sometimes even the closing of departments or institutions. On several occasions during my time as president of the ISA I have had to defend institutions threatened with closure, most frequently for reasons of economic viability which is an absurd argument and a very short-sighted one.

The change – and this is already more interesting – can be seen by considering the localization of research and teaching in our subject throughout the world: we now have a much stronger foothold than we used to have on the planet. Today, sociologists study social problems, facts or relations in many countries where, until very recently, research was practically either forbidden – I am thinking in particular of China – or else under heavy ideological or political control – I have in mind in particular the countries in the ex-Soviet Empire; in other instances, research was dominated and even implemented by researchers who came from outside the society in the context of colonial type or even post-colonial type relations. Today sociology is very much alive in China, in the ex-Soviet Empire or in the former colonies of western countries. Accelerating this movement and improving the establishment of our association in countries other than those for which it has a predilection has even been one of my major concerns – as it was also of my predecessors. It has been a great pleasure for me to have been able to invite a Chinese colleague for the first presidential session of our Congress. I shall be equally delighted in the closing session of our 2010 Congress to attend the presentation of what our Japanese colleagues are preparing for the Congress in Yokohama in 2014. Thus in a way we can say that sociology also is global and is no longer restricted to the societies in which it was founded; like many other phenomenon it has become deterritorialized and taken root in parts of the world other than Europe or North America where it originated and first prospered.

But the essential point is in the content of what we do, in our orientations and in our fundamental discussions: here we can speak of a significant change.

In the 1960s, sociology was organized around a few major paradigms which shaped a theoretical space in relation to which each individual could situate themselves. At this point sociology entered a phase of rejection of the major theories. We witnessed the dying embers of functionalism and the dismantling of the statue of Talcott Parsons. Then structuralism, which was still very much alive at the beginning of the 1970s, began its historical decline. Marxism, possibly combined with other modes of approach such as structuralism or functionalism was neglected while liberal ideologies prospered, then neo-liberal ideas which sometimes left their mark on the social sciences with, for example, the success of certain variants of methodological individualism. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s this evolution gained momentum and we witnessed the return or the rise of symbolic interactionism and other related schools including phenomenological sociology or ethnomethodology. Their common denominator is a genuine move away from the grand general visions of collective life and setting the

analysis in a historical or political perspective is hardly one of their primary concerns. Some social thinkers claimed to belong to the post-modernity school in order to stress the end of grand narratives, like Jean-François Lyotard, for example.

From then on, an important trend in sociology has been to propose research studies with rather limited ambitions, at least if it is a question of considering the world in its social, political and historical dimensions at the same time. Thus, in some instances, the researcher adds an explanatory variable to the list of variables used to account for a specific phenomenon. In others they limit themselves to a very specific question which demands all their energy but do not set it in a wider context. This trend, and it is not a paradox, is wholly compatible with what is another important trend in our subject: the capacity to articulate with other disciplines. Thus a sociologist working on a specific, limited object may very well mobilize social anthropology, political science, economics or legal studies etc. around this object. But this does not mean to say that the researcher will proceed to a higher level of generality, setting their restricted research study into a much wider perspective, in a much larger historical, political and social sphere.

There are now very few amongst us who would be willing to accept theories which explain everything, and into which all you have to do is enter the facts, as if the empirical research merely served to validate a theory established in advance once and for all. But we are still too hesitant in articulating a research study bearing on a specific or restricted issue with its setting in a more general perspective.

The problem is not our capacity to theorize: we can easily do this without having to set the analysis in a general vision of the world. The problem tends to be one of our capacity to articulate studies with restricted horizons with a general vision of collective life. These visions are either dated and we then hesitate to base ourselves on them, or else they are fragmented. The principal task of the sociology of tomorrow is undoubtedly to construct new or renewed theoretical systems within which we will be able to exchange and improve the discussion of our work.

It is this general issue which I would like to address.

I

A convenient starting point is afforded by a word which we meet constantly, globalization – the French prefer to use the term *mondialisation* from *monde* meaning ‘the world’. This term can fulfill two functions. The first is descriptive, or, if you prefer, historical. To speak of globalization then means to describe the world, as it functions, with its capitalism without borders which has considerably changed since the time when Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital*. The most summary versions of this first meaning of the word ‘globalization’ – in an endeavor to use the concept to explain the overwhelming power of finance – stress the absence of frontiers for money and markets, but not for people. Others, in more subtle fashion, add cultural dimensions to these economic descriptions, listing for example the internet, the cinema, migrants’ networks with their connections all over the world, forming diasporas or transnational communities.

The second function of the word ‘globalization’ which interests me much more, is analytical. It refers to a way of thinking, a way of approaching problems which relate to sociology; it consists in ‘thinking globally’. In this instance, it is not a question of linking

all our objects or all our concerns to a world or planet level vision. Instead, it is a question of setting them into approaches which challenge these objects from this point of view, while not excluding others, and even at the same time, on the contrary, of successfully articulating them. Thus, instead of retreating into the 'methodological nationalism' criticized by Ulrich Beck, why not consider that the nation-state constitutes a framework which is obviously useful but is not exclusive and that it must be possible to confront the real world by conjugating several levels of analysis, from the most general, that of the planet, or the world, to the most local?

But does 'thinking globally' not constitute an invitation to move away from objects, but also from modes of reasoning, focused on what seems at first sight totally remote from the global or the general: the individual person, their subjectivity, calculations, frustrations and emotions? I am going to suggest an answer here which may seem astonishing.

II

I do indeed consider, and this is only paradoxical in appearance, that the processes of globalization are closely linked to the processes of individualization and the rise in individualism. As we know individualism is not a new phenomenon. But nor is globalization: some authors even describe the history of mankind as a permanent process of globalization, since the first steps of small groups of people leaving their bases in Africa to begin to people almost the whole world as the millennia go by. Modern individualism develops with globalization; and globalization implies the existence of markets and networks activating a culture of communication, marketing and advertising, all of which undermine constitutional bodies and forms of mediation thus weakening the institutions responsible for collective values or the welfare states. How can we avoid referring to a problem of this sort in this very place, in Göteborg in Sweden, one of the countries in which these values have found their highest expression? Individualism progresses with the challenges which globalization levels at nation-states, but also at societies, at least if one agrees to call 'society' a set of relationships socially defined within a specific framework, usually a state and a nation. Whence the idea defended by my mentor Alain Touraine that today the very notion of society should be discarded. Individualism also progresses, and this is not a paradox, as a form of resistance to globalization, as the assertion of the personal subject, of the individual who wishes to construct themselves, find their own bearings and free themselves of constraints which are increasingly global – all these norms which dictate behavior and subject individuals to pressures from markets, finance, advertising and intense social competition.

This observation does not exempt us from studying the most classical social questions. Instead it obliges us to make a two-fold effort. On the one hand we have to ask what the social inequalities and injustices are today compared with what they might have been in the recent past. For example, yesterday, the social question was dominated by the theme of exploitation in the work-place, the existence of relations of domination which, for industrial societies in any case, were played out in the first instance in the factory or the workshop. Today, if I can put it like this, for countless human beings the principal social drama is not being exploited; it is unemployment, exclusion, vulnerability and anything which bears the mark of a lack of social relations. As a result, poverty has once again become established as a credible concern – a sort of posthumous reversal of situation or

revenge of Proudhon over Marx. Behind these situations, we rapidly find individuals who have lost their bearings, whose subjectivity does not succeed in finding an outlet in action and to whom society, or rather globalization, sends a message which is intolerable: consume, gain access to the fruits of modernity and be yourself, be autonomous. Thus, I think that one of the sources of contemporary Islamism, in its radical violence as in some of the aspects of the quietism of the Tabligh or the neo-Salafist nebula, resides precisely in this message of individualism directed at populations who receive it and experience it in the realms of modernity but who do not have the means to fully access it.

On the other hand, the observation that there is a rise in individualism is an encouragement to the study of the processes of subjectivation and de-subjectivation by means of which individuals are constructed and crushed today. These processes are related to the social question. In particular, contrary to the utopias of the 1990s which forecast the 'end of labour', we have a better understanding today of the meaning of work from the point of view of the individual for whom it is both liberation and suffering, creation and deprivation – thus we rediscover the ideas which were central to the thinking of one of my predecessors in the role of president of the ISA, Georges Friedmann. Above all, these processes are not only social, in the classical sense of the adjective: they are also cultural and religious.

The rise of individualism means that, more than ever, culture is the outcome, in movement of all sorts of individual choices each of which can become involved with, or extricated from what we refer to as – it is not the best word – identities. In the past, culture seemed to reproduce itself; each individual more or less took on the identity dictated by the family, the community or the Nation; today, identities are produced, or 'invented' in the words of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. This approach is also valid for religion – all I would say here is that a major problem for us today is how to allow for what belongs to religion and what belongs to culture, a question which is central to Clifford Geertz' last text.

Sociology is in motion because it is continuing to study themes which are classical to it, but have been fundamentally re-thought to the point that it is led to ask questions which would have been iconoclastic yesterday. I have just presided over a European panel which was examining candidatures for large research grants and amongst the themes taken up I can, for example, mention two which would have been unthinkable twenty years ago: one of the award winners questions whether redistribution is not a factor of tension and violence? Another questions whether or not it can be demonstrated that democracy is a source of economic or social progress. Today, sociology is opening up new research fields in themes and objects which are newer to it; sociology is interested in the 'social' but, also, increasingly in the cultural and is rediscovering one of its founding concerns which, twenty or thirty years ago it was tending to neglect – religion. We have ceased to think that reason and the inheritance of the Enlightenment should of necessity shape a modernity characterized by the decline of religion. Similarly, sociology considers violence and war in new terms, far from those which dominated at the time of the cold war, whether it be a question of domestic violence, to which in particular women and children are subjected, or that of terrorism and political violence, with their infra and metapolitical forms bringing the former closer to organized crime and the latter to radicalized religion.

III

Sociology is in transition if we consider its relation to other fields of knowledge. I have just been speaking about culture and history: there are considerable changes taking place there. Thus in the past sociology tended to study society, *hic et nunc*, the social, social problems, relations or facts and left to ethnology or social anthropology the task of studying culture, far away, in countries distant from the West, or else at home in the survivals inherited from the past, that is, folklore. Today, the boundaries between disciplines are blurred, the most exotic forms of otherness are to be found everywhere in the West and modernity is also everywhere. The divisions shaped by colonialism have given way to post-colonialism, and beyond, and the social anthropologist's favorite method – I mean participant observation – is also a very common practice for us, sociologists. Yesterday, societies were in history; today many of us are fascinated by the role of memory and by the actors who claim to be part of history; memory and history are part of social life.

Similarly we are led to consider our relations with philosophy and more particularly with political philosophy, quite simply because we are increasingly being requested to describe the world as it is but also to deduce from our analyses proposals concerning what seems to us to be just, good or desirable. This can be seen, for example, in relation to questions of ethics. Yesterday, ethics were superimposed on collective life, dictating its values from above. Today, what we refer to as ethics is increasingly a point of view about a particular problem, each case being considered individually. Sociologists are mobilized to define this point of view as well as specialists from other fields of knowledge, for example in the context of the committees for clinical ethics located in hospitals where their opinion sheds light on sensitive decisions of life and death.

This leads me to observe that, increasingly, our relations with other disciplines bring us into contact with scientists from what are known as the hard sciences. This is obvious as soon as it is a question of the climate or the environment, or the so-called natural catastrophes – and which are usually only 'natural' to a very small extent. Yet again, we see this in relation to water and food which constitute major issues at stake for which scientists from all fields mobilize, within NGOs for example; these may include sociologists. This is why I have invited a Nobel Prize for chemistry, Professor Lee, who is also the future president of the ICSU to open our discussions tomorrow morning; this is a way of indicating our openness to disciplines which, at first sight, are very far from ours. The example which I have just given of committees for clinical ethics, in which doctors and the nursing personnel also participate also enables me to illustrate an important point: we also work with 'professionals' from other fields with whom we co-produce knowledge. Of course, this is not new and, as from its beginnings, sociology has worked together with social workers, doctors and the legal profession in this way in several countries if only to alert public opinion to major problems, such as poverty, racism and the lack of hygiene. But it seems to me that today something new is occurring in this sphere.

IV

Since I am approaching my conclusion, I would now like to look toward the future by examining two points which I consider important.

The first is that of our relevance. Sociology is meant to be scientific and rigorous which forces us to consider demonstrations appropriate for us. Where are the proofs in our subject? We cannot really carry out experiments as in the majority of the exact sciences and we are increasingly subject to evaluations which judge our research studies, our academic journals and our institutions along lines which are too often akin to those which Sorokin referred to in the 1940s as 'quantophrenia'. Over and above the opinions which we all have of one another, and the caution we exercise when considering quantified 'evaluations' which do risk subjecting us to norms which rapidly become bureaucratic or to demands of short term economic viability, how can we maintain that our findings are scientific? I think that the relevance of our research is increasingly to be found in what others – rather than ourselves – say about us and not only because they are evaluating us. Our relevance lies in what the actors in our research studies say and do, whether they be in the political, social, economic or cultural sphere. This does not imply the least submission on our part; this does not oblige us to work on behalf of one or other of these actors, but rather, to accept having our work discussed in the public sphere and not only in our own scientific community.

Of course, not all of us necessarily share this point of view; in any case it seems to me that in the future we will be increasingly led to discuss this issue which is inseparable from a second issue: that of our participation in public life.

Some of us, with convincing arguments, wish to remain 'professionals' who, as such, only have discussions within the academic community. Others behave as experts who put their knowledge at the disposal of a power, an opposing power or the media – and why not? Others think it is possible to revive the old figure of the committed intellectual, to have a direct influence on public discussion and in particular on political life, a stand which in history has too frequently led to illusions if not to the misdeeds which ideologists and others – organic intellectuals à la Gramsci – gave their support to. Personally, I am convinced that our contribution can be useful, over and above academic life alone on condition that we adopt an approach in which the production of knowledge and the testing of its relevance are articulated in a single process. We can speak here of the sociological intervention or of deliberative sociology, or again of action-research or of clinical sociology – all approaches which obviously deserve to be discussed. The fact remains that the discussion, there also, is open and that the question of commitment deserves, in my opinion, to be articulated with that of the relevance of our research.

But, in the world of tomorrow, will we still be 'sociologists'? Will it still be necessary to talk about 'sociology'? I have already said that the very object which defines us, society, is challenged, including by some sociologists and important ones at that. I have also observed that many research studies are presented as pluri-disciplinary and that the distances between classical subjects, for example social anthropology and sociology often seem to be blurred, without mentioning the recent emergence of transdisciplinary fields, like cultural studies. Would it not be better, in future, to speak of social science in the singular, as the Anglo-Saxons do, or in the plural, as the French do, and accept the idea of our being diluted in an entity of this type? This idea is not new; it can also be reversed, with sociology becoming the social science par excellence making it appear as something of a hegemony. This sort of idea comes up against many obstacles, beginning with those which are institutional in nature and are linked for example to the organization of universities, teaching or the careers or researcher-lecturers. It also

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incurs the risk of distancing us from our intellectual inheritance, to which we have good reasons to be attached, no matter what our personal orientations may be. It therefore has disadvantages as well as advantages and I am not going to end my term of office by making it my main concern! Although I do not intend to promote it I mention it here merely because it has the advantage of encouraging us to ask important questions and perhaps to advance in what seems to me the most important thing today: an improvement in our capacity to generalize in our research studies, and to have discussions at this level - sometimes referred to as theoretical - while maintaining a fundamental requirement which is to produce knowledge on the basis of the exploration of material realities.

Thank you for your attention.