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The turn toward soft variables in sociological theory

Double paradigmatic shift

Two sociologies

From its birth in the nineteenth century, sociology has been torn between two alternative emphases: the focus on social collectivities (societies) and the focus on socially embedded individuals (social actors). There have, in fact, always been “two sociologies” (Dawe 1978: 366), two distinct, parallel lines of sociological heritage. The “first sociology” was focusing on “social organisms,” societal wholes, complex structures, social systems, with their own specific principles of operation, particular properties and regularities. The founding fathers of the “first sociology” were Comte, Spencer, and Marx. The “second sociology” focused on “human animals,” societal members, human individuals, and particularly on their actions; what people do, how they behave individually and collectively in social contexts. The founding fathers of the second sociology were Weber, Pareto, and Mead. For a long time the first sociology has dominated the field. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the sociology of systems began to lose the contest to the sociology of action. At present we witness a consistent paradigmatic shift.

At the ontological level there is a turn away from “hard,” organic, holistic, or systemic images of society, toward the “soft,” field image of the social fabric, seen as a fluid and constantly moving pattern, a changing matrix of human actions and interactions.¹ At the epistemological level there is the corresponding turn from structural explanations invoking “hard” variables – like class position, status, economic situation, demographic trends, settlement patterns, technological

developments, organizational forms – toward cultural explanations, focusing on “soft” intangibles like meanings, symbols, rules, values, norms, codes, frames, and forms of discourse.

Two sociologies of action

Within the “second sociology,” with its focus on social actions, another paradigmatic shift seems to take place. There are also “two sociologies of action,” two alternative images of what human actors do. And now we witness a turn from the “hard,” utilitarian, instrumental, positivistic image of action (as exemplified by behaviorism, exchange theory, game theory, rational-choice theory), toward the “soft,” humanistic, meaningful image of action (as exemplified by symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, cultural studies).

At the ontological level, there is a shift from the image of action seen as purely rational, constantly calculating, consistently maximizing profit and minimizing cost (“homo economicus”), toward the richer picture including also emotional, traditional, normative, cultural components: value orientations, social bonds, attachments, loyalties, solidarities, identities. From here, two research directions open. One emphasizes psychological meanings – motivations, reasons, intentions, attitudes – and leads toward a socio-psychological theory of action. Its early forerunners are William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in their theories of social actions (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918–20; Znaniecki 1967 [1934]). Another research direction, putting emphasis on cultural meaning – rules, values, norms, symbols – leads toward a culturalist sociology of action. The early forerunner of such an approach was George H. Mead with his theory of the act (Mead 1964). Another canonical author is Talcott Parsons with his emphasis on normative orientation of action (Parsons 1968 [1937]). A number of recent theorists elaborate the idea of cultural embeddedness of action, for example, Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of the “habitus” (Bourdieu 1977), or Jeffrey Alexander’s notion of “polarized discourses” (Alexander and Smith 1993). It is interesting to note that the less dogmatic representatives of the opposite, “hard” instrumental and rational image of action, also allow some “soft” cultural components into their analyses. This occurs – for example – in recent more liberal brands of rational-choice theory. Anthony Giddens reads Jon Elster’s revisionist version of that approach as admitting that “rational choice theory needs to be complemented with an analysis of social norms; and that norms provide sources of motivation that are ‘irreducible to rationality’” (Giddens 1990b: 223). In similar

vein James Short Jr. writes about “social and cultural rationality” as embedded in social and cultural values and reflected in individual choice. He perceives human action as a mixture of self-interest and normative commitment derived from the engulfing cultural context (Short 1984: 719).

At the epistemological level this paradigmatic change is reflected by allowing various kinds of qualitative, interpretative, hermeneutical procedures, suitable for unraveling the cultural aspects of action. It is also marked by the reversal of perspective: from treating action as the dependent variable to be explained by rational appraisal of circumstances, toward treating action as an independent, creative variable, involved in constructing, shaping, and modifying all other social objects, including social wholes of all sorts: groups, communities, societies. Hence, the demand to explain those social objects by reference to actions which brought them about via the processes of structural emergence, or “morphogenesis” (Archer 1988).

The focus on culture

Duality of culture

The composite result of the double paradigmatic shift is the ascendance of culture to the top of sociological concerns. Describing the recent career of the concept, Ulf Hannerz calls it a true “success story” (Hannerz 1993: 95). But whereas social anthropologists or ethnologists have retained, at least in part, their traditional interest in culture *per se*, as a specific realm possessing its own anatomy and displaying its own tendencies of change, the sociologists have focused on the ways in which culture links with action. The new image of action has revealed that culture is intimately related to action in a double fashion. Paraphrasing Anthony Giddens’ notion of the “duality of structure,” it may be said that from the vantage point of action there exists a parallel “duality of culture.” On the one hand culture provides a pool of resources for action that draws from it the values to set its goals, the norms to specify the means, the symbols to furnish it with meaning, the codes to express its cognitive content, the frames to order its components, the rituals to provide it with continuity and sequence and so forth. In brief, culture supplies action with axiological, normative, and cognitive orientation. In this way it becomes a strong determining force, releasing, facilitating, enabling, or, as the case might be, arresting, constraining, or preventing action. On the other hand, action is at the same time creatively shaping

and reshaping culture, which is not a God-given constant, but rather must be seen as an accumulated product, or preserved sediment of earlier individual and collective actions. In brief, action is the ultimate determining factor in the emergence, or morphogenesis of culture.

Cultural intangibles and imponderables

Recognizing that in human collectivities actions do not occur separately and independently from each other, but rather interrelate in complex fields of actions (designated, depending on their various modes of cohering, as groups, communities, organizations, associations, institutions, states, markets, etc.), the sociologists also focused on some synthetic cultural qualities of such interactional fields, obviously bearing on their overall functioning. As such synthetic cultural features are highly intangible, hard to pin down empirically and operationalize, they are often addressed in metaphorical terms as social moods, social climate, social atmosphere, collective morale, social boredom, social optimism, social pessimism, social malaise, and so forth. The concept of “agency,” in the special sense of the self-transforming potential of society and the prerequisite for social becoming (Sztompka 1991a, 1993a), as well as two concepts central for my argument in the present book, namely the trust culture and the syndrome of distrust, clearly belong to the same category.

Turning from the general synthetic qualities of the social field toward a more detailed picture of its anatomy, to the analysis of the fabric or tissue of which the social field is made, the culturalist perspective directs attention to a specific category of social bonds: the world of “soft” interpersonal relationships. After the long domination of the “hard” instrumental picture of social ties based on interests and calculation, fiscally mediated relationships, individualistic, egoistic rationality, we witness the rediscovery of the other face of society, the area of “soft” moral bonds. Viable society is perceived not only as the coalition of interests, but as a moral community. The term “moral” seems appropriate because it grasps all the main aspects of the phenomenon we described. Morality, as understood here, refers to the ways in which people relate to others, and it identifies the right, proper, obligatory relationships, invoking values rather than interests as the justification for prescribed conduct. As Francis Fukuyama characterizes it, moral community is based on ethical habits and reciprocal moral obligations internalized by the community’s members (Fukuyama 1995: 7). “This idea of society has less to do with formal organization than with a sense

of belonging, trust and responsibility, and duties towards others who share our values, interests and goals” (Misztal 1996: 206–207).

The moral community is a specific way of relating to others whom we define as “us.”² Three moral obligations define the parameter of the “us” category. “Us” means those whom we trust, toward whom we are loyal, and for whose problems we care in the spirit of solidarity. In other words, according to this interpretation, there are three basic components of moral community. The first is trust, that is, the expectancy of others’ virtuous conduct toward ourselves. The second is loyalty, that is, the obligation to refrain from breaching the trust that others have bestowed upon us and to fulfill duties taken upon ourselves by accepting somebody’s trust.³ The third is solidarity, that is, caring for other people’s interests and the readiness to take action on behalf of others, even if it conflicts with our own interests. These three vectors delineate the specific “moral space” in which each individual is situated. Obviously, there are also more complex, multi-dimensional interpersonal relations of the “soft” type, incorporating those three components in various proportions. They are: friendship, love, patriotism, patron–client relationships (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984: 3), ritual kinship, and others. The moral components may also appear as dimensions of quite formal, interested, and instrumental relationships: employment contract (e.g., team spirit, loyalty to the firm), business transactions (e.g., trust toward the partner). Moral community is reflected at the individual level in personal identity, that is, self-definition of one’s place within the moral space and delineation of the limits of moral space in which one feels obliged to trust, to be loyal, and to show solidarity to others. In other words it is the indication of the “us” to which “I” feel that I belong.

The recognition of cultural embeddedness of each single action is one of the significant contributions of the culturalist focus. Another is the identification of general cultural traits characterizing a pluralistic and interconnected set of actions – a social field. Still another achievement is the analysis of the moral bonds linking individuals within a social field. I believe that all three contributions are crucially important for understanding the social life.

Intellectual origins of the culturalist turn

Seeking intellectual legitimacy for such a culturalistic orientation in classical sociological heritage, one can immediately point to two names. The first is Emile Durkheim, and his doctrine of “social facts” *sui generis*, or “collective representations” (Durkheim 1964a [1895]). As I

read him, he had in mind precisely the cultural intangibles: shared by pluralities of individuals (therefore interindividual, predicated of the socio-individual field, rather than each individual separately), perceived by individuals as external to them (as the features of the field in which they are immersed), and constraining with respect to individual actions (providing actions with axiological, normative, and cognitive orientation). Law, morality, ideology, religion – the standard Durkheimian examples – clearly fit this description. And it was Durkheim who strongly emphasized the moral quality of bonds keeping people together, rejecting the purely instrumental, interest-centered image of social fabric. “Men cannot live together without acknowledging, and consequently making, mutual sacrifices, without tying themselves to one another with strong, durable bonds” (Durkheim 1964b [1883]: 228). No wonder that the contemporary culturalist school in sociology so often reaches back to Durkheim (Alexander 1988).

Another forerunner of the culturalist approach is Alexis de Tocqueville, and his idea of the “habits of the heart.”

In order that society should exist and, a fortiori, that a society should prosper, it is necessary that the mind of all the citizens should be rallied and held together by certain predominant ideas; and this cannot be the case unless each of them sometimes draws his opinions from the common source and consents to accept certain matters of belief already formed. (Tocqueville 1945, Vol. II: 8)

In spite of a somewhat misleading terminology of “the mind,” which could suggest a psychological bias, he was as far from psychological individualism as possible. As I read him, he referred to collective mentalities, patterns for thinking and doing widespread in a society, and providing ready-made templates for individual actions. The habits of the heart did not originate in individual hearts (or minds), but rather were borrowed from the surrounding cultural milieu, internalized in personalities and displayed in actions. They clearly belonged to cultural intangibles, in the sense explicated above.

The concern for the condition of moral bonds and moral community has been expressed directly and indirectly by a number of other classical thinkers, especially those who, contrary to the prevailing mood, started to perceive dark sides of modernity. They have initiated long, critical debates that still continue. Five themes seem most persistent. First, the “lonely crowd theme,” running from Tönnies (1957 [1887]) to Riesman (1950), indicating the atrophy of moral communities, isolation, atomization, and individualization of social life. Second, the “iron cage theme,” running from Weber (1968 [1922]) to Bauman (1988), focusing on the

formalization, depersonalization, and instrumentalization of interpersonal relations, bureaucratization of social organizations, and reification of individuals. Third, the “anomie theme,” running from Durkheim (1951 [1897]) to Merton (1996 [1938]: 132–152) and emphasizing the chaotic and antinomic nature of axiological and legal regulations. Fourth, the “alienation theme” running from Marx (1975 [1844]) to Seeman (1959), pointing to the distancing of the individual from economic and political organization, which leads to the loss of identity, dignity, or sense of purpose in life. Fifth, the “revolt of the masses theme,” initiated by Ortega Y Gasset (1957 [1930]) and Wirth (1938), delineating the negative sides of urbanization and the development of mass symbolic culture, as the de-moralizing milieu of day-to-day existence for the majority of people.

In modern sociology, apart from the continuation of those classical themes, there have appeared some new innovative lines of research, drawing attention to “soft” cultural intangibles and “soft” moral bonds. They have evolved around six theoretical concepts. First, as early as the 1960s there appeared numerous studies of “civic culture,” initiated by the influential book by Almond and Verba (1965 [1963]). Addressing the domain of political life, they switched the research focus from the traditional concern with “hard” legal and institutional facts to underlying “soft” factors: values, beliefs, competences related to politics. They defined the concept as “attitudes towards the political system and its various parts, and attitudes towards the role of the self in the system” (Almond and Verba 1965: 13). Such attitudes were seen as including knowledge, feelings, and evaluations (cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientations toward politics).

Second, in the eighties, in the wake of pro-democratic movements and anti-communist revolutions in East-Central Europe, the classic notion of “civil society” was dug out from oblivion and significantly elaborated (Keane 1988; Cohen and Arato 1992; Alexander 1992, 1998; Seligman 1992; Kumar 1993). In one of its meanings, it clearly took on a cultural connotation. Robust civil society was seen as synonymous with axiological consensus and developed emotional community, bound by the tight network of interpersonal loyalties, commitments, solidarities. It designated mature public opinion and rich public life, the identification of citizens with public institutions, concern with the common good, and respect for laws. In modern sociology, such a neo-Durkheimian, culturalistic interpretation of civil society is put forward by Jeffrey Alexander: “Civil society is the arena of social solidarity that is defined in universalistic terms. It is the we-ness of a national community, the feeling of

connectedness to one another that transcends particular commitments, loyalties, and interests and allows there to emerge a single thread of identity among otherwise disparate people” (Alexander 1992: 2).

Third, the analysis of the French educational system has brought Pierre Bourdieu to propose the powerful idea of “cultural capital.” He was seeking for the secret of persisting social hierarchies, pronounced inequalities, elitist tendencies, surviving in spite of democratic and egalitarian forms of social organization. And again the key was found at the hidden cultural level. Cultural capital was defined as “institutionalized, i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for cultural and social exclusion, the former referring to exclusion from jobs and resources, and the latter, to exclusion from high status groups” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979: 158). Such signals and resources for exclusion are transmitted by socialization and education and incorporated as dispositions, or “habitus.”

Fourth, the study of the economic backwardness of Southern Italy has suggested to Robert Putnam the fruitful idea of “social capital,” which has become immensely popular and widely applied in research (Putnam 1995a). He meant by that, “features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives . . . Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust” (Putnam 1995b: 664–665). This concept was also crucial for the argument of Francis Fukuyama (1995), who saw in it the secret of economic development in South-East Asia.

Fifth, the cross-national comparative research into dominant value orientation, led Ronald Inglehart to propose the notion of “postmaterialist values,” apparently emerging in most developed societies during the last decades of the century (Inglehart 1988, 1990). The growing preoccupation with self-realization, harmony with nature, cultivation of tradition, quality of life, health and fitness, personal dignity, peace, human solidarity, metaphysical cravings, and so forth, indicates the shift from “hard” economic interests toward “soft” cultural concerns and commitments. The visible manifestation of this is to be found in the proliferation of “new social movements” (ecological, feminist, pacifist) and new types of communities and associations (Amnesty International, Greenpeace, New Age), finding the bases of integration in new types of common cultural values.

Finally, my own focus on the vicissitudes of postcommunist transition in East-Central Europe has led me to propose the concept of “civilizational competence,” by which I mean the complex set of cultural

predispositions embracing a readiness for political participation and self-government, work discipline, entrepreneurial spirit, educational aspirations, technological skills, ethical principles, esthetic sensibilities – all of them indispensable for full deployment and consolidation of democratic polity, market economy, and open circulation of thought (Sztompka 1993b).

One may speculate which intellectual and social circumstances have led to the focus on culture, the concern with hidden intangibles and imponderables or elusive moral bonds. Part of the answer may be found in the immanent intellectual tendencies in the discipline of sociology: the exhaustion of “hard” structural or institutional explanations, the challenge of unresolved puzzles, growing intellectual unrest. But perhaps more importantly there are social reasons, having to do with new phenomena and events occurring in human societies and directing the attention of sociologists toward the sphere of culture.

Social origins of the culturalist turn

There is, first, a growing perception of the defects and inefficiencies of some institutional frameworks earlier taken for granted: democratic political regimes, the welfare state, a free market economy. Ungovernability, economic recessions, and social unrest have affected even the most developed and prosperous countries. Barbara Misztal notices “the emergence of widespread consciousness that existing bases for social cooperation, solidarity and consensus have been eroded and that there is a need to search for new alternatives” (Misztal 1996: 3). Looking for deeper causes of troubles under the facade of seemingly faultless institutional designs, sociologists and political scientists hit upon cultural factors.

Second, there is the growing realization that the same institutions may operate quite differently in various societies. Already in the period of postcolonial forced modernization after World War II, the comparative evidence was showing the failure of Western political and economic institutions in some African or Latin American societies, while documenting their considerable success in Asia (Indian democracy, Japanese capitalism, etc.). Similar observations indicate strikingly different fates of immigrants or refugees, coming from various parts of the world, in spite of the common institutional setting in which they find themselves in the country of destination. The levels of their adaptive success vary tremendously (e.g., Koreans and Chinese versus Mexicans or Puerto Ricans in the US). The reason for those disparities was discovered in

fundamentally different indigenous cultural milieus, or legacies fit or unfit to new structures.

Third, in the domain of international relations, there is “the increasing sense that culture plays a crucial and neglected role in world politics” (Rengger 1997: 476). The dominant view that international politics is primarily about “real” or “hard” economic interests of countries is undermined by the eruption of conflicts rooted in resentments, hostile stereotypes, prejudices, particularistic identities, even contrasting lifestyles, values, and orientations. Divisive forces of religious fundamentalism, ethnic or racial loyalties, and new forms of nationalism seem to manifest themselves particularly strongly in our times.

Fourth, the epochal events of the year 1989 and the collapse of communism, apart from their political and economic implications, also signify a major cultural and civilizational break (Sztompka 1996c). The importance of the cultural dimension of the postcommunist transition first manifested itself in the pervasive experience of obstacles, blocks, barriers, slow-downs, frictions, or backlashes on the path toward democracy and the market. Trying to understand the reasons for that “surprise syndrome” (Lepenes 1992) undermining the early enthusiasm and optimism of the reformers, some perceptive observers turned toward hidden cultural factors. Three metaphors used at that time are particularly telling. Andrew Nagorski, *Newsweek*’s correspondent for Eastern Europe, has titled one of his first columns after the fall of the Berlin Wall: “The Wall in Our Heads,” suggesting that “hard,” tangible changes are only the beginning, as the remnants of communist culture and its traces in human mentalities will still haunt postcommunist societies for a long time (Nagorski 1991: 4). Zbigniew Brzeziński, reflecting on the widely expressed aspirations of “joining Europe,” introduces a distinction between “joining a European house,” and “joining a European home.” The house is a “hard” architectural edifice, the home is a “soft” area of intimacy, loyalties, attachments, a place where one truly “feels at home.” Joining the framework of common political, legal, and economic institutions is not the same as developing the common cultural milieu. The latter is much more demanding, cannot be legislated, and requires slow, gradual evolution (Brzeziński 1989). The temporal aspect of transition is taken by the third metaphor, that of “three clocks” proposed by Ralf Dahrendorf. In the first book to come out about the “revolutions” in Eastern Europe, he notices the inevitably uneven tempo of reforms at various levels of social life. There is the quickest clock of the lawyers and politicians, who are able to introduce new constitutions and legal regulations almost overnight. There is the much slower clock of the