Postmodern Openings

2015, Volume 6, Issue 2, December, pp. 9-13

The Self-Reflexivity of Social Action

Bogdan POPOVENIUC

The Self-Reflexivity of Social Action

Bogdan POPOVENIUC[1]

Abstract

The most puzzling and striking feature of Social Theory lies in the impossibility to control its leaning toward self-fulfilling statements. In Sociology, the epistemic explanation become part of explained world and the Theory is at risk to become either futile or subjective along with the dialectic evolution of social understanding. As major mature sciences, it has solid instruments and methods for acquiring useful knowledge, self-regulatory rules for assuring the accuracy of its affirmations and errors refutation. More than any other sciences, it achieved the level of meta-theoretical thinking about its own practice and sets up its limits and expertise. However this is not enough. The understanding brought by sociological the most evolved concept of reflexivity is overwhelmed complexity of social reality, because it fails to cover the self-reference supposed by itself. The Scientific discourse of third person should be transcended toward the level of dialectical co-constructed consciousness-reality awareness, that the subjective "I", is the condition of possibility for objective knowledge (of Science), which, in turn, represents the categorical conditions of possibility for (self-)understanding.

A self-reflexive level of understanding instead, would illuminate many concealed suppositions, conundrums and inconsistencies of social discourse and reasoning. This enhancement is also required to put the present uncontrolled collective intelligent development of Mankind on a safety and desirable path.

Keywords: *social action, reflexivity, self-reflexivity, instrumental-rational, value-rational.*

---

[1] University "Stefan cel Mare" of Suceava, bpopoveniuc@usv.ro.

The most puzzling and striking feature of Social Theory lies in the impossibility to control its leaning toward self-fulfilling statements. In Sociology, the epistemic explanation become part of explained world and the Theory is at risk to become either futile or subjective along with the dialectic evolution of social understanding.

This is the case with the Classical Theory of Social Action (CTSA) that became insufficient for explaining the realities of modern global (cybernetic) interconnected world. The poli-relatedness and multilevel of social interactions is too complex for being reduce to such rigid mechanism of rational calculus. CTSA focus mostly on the natural thinking which supports intelligent human action in social environment, an image resulted from the model of Illuminist Man. But such conduct is not as different as intended from the general intelligent behaviour in natural settings. The prehistorically hunter, for instance, should take into consideration the possible future actions and reactions of his prey. If an "action is social insofar as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course." (Weber, 1978, p. 4) But any intelligent action has subjective meaning attached to it, and takes account the behaviour of other things, so the definition of social action boils down to "an action which takes place in social settings"! It is obvious that is not an explanation as it looks at first sight, but a (tautological?) statement.

The social action is close linked with reflexivity. A closer analysis reveals that the concept of reflexivity is usually a useless concept like the aforesaid definition of social action. It is rather an *explanadum* observation and not an *explanans* cognition. Social medium is a reflective one, reactive to any overt action. Social reality, unlike natural environment, is not ruled by immovable and repetitive laws of cause and effect, but by probable and non-linear determinism(s) acting in certain degrees. Social laws of actions are affected by ideology, values, norms, morals and so on. Hence, social action is governed by a multitude of diverse probable tendencies based on cultural mediated determinism. The self-reference or the reflexivity concept of Sociology is not so productive, if it fails to move beyond the factual observation. I don't mean that it has no scientific value. On the contrary, it reflects an accurate factual observation and it has leveled up the explanation in social disciplines, by replacing the outdated and primitive mechanical

concept used by the earlier sociological theories for understanding social actions and relations. But it has an inaccurate incompletion because it fails to cover the self-reference supposed by itself. As long as social action is self-reflective, the concepts used in social theory for explaining the social reality, become part of it. They affect and transform the very reality they seek to explain. So, the meaning of self-referring component of reflexivity concept of Sociology should evolve into self-reflexivity. It is not about a proactive self-fulfilling of a theory – the upper limit of understanding in classical Sociology – but *the* creation *of the meaning of a theory from the reality explained by it*. The traditional inductive and deductive ways of reasoning must be backed up by abductive procedures and the reflexive status of social theory become overt. The human consciousness, and hence the social reality of human interactions is self-reflexive and self-explanatory. The social reality creates the very concepts and meanings (Science) that explain it. It is possible that us, at present level of understanding, to not be able to realize this collective self-reflexive intelligence which takes shape in this very moment, from the global interconnection of individual consciousness's activity, and through scientific endeavour much more than through any other form, cultural or religious.

So the classical reflexivity, in the sense it is used today, is far for being a concept able to deal with the complexity of social reality. Moreover it is useless for the present moment of human global evolution, which is an uncontrolled collective intelligent development. A more advance concept is needed in order to put the future progress of Mankind on a safety and desirable path. The maximum creative quality of reflexivity concept is only a passive anticipative with no prospective dimension, as has the self-reflexivity one. The latter is a constructive, self-employed one which can express the self-constructed character of social reality. The self-reflexivity is required for illuminating the true nature and motivation of (one's) social action and for understanding the real possible consequences. CTSA fails to take into account it own influence, as scientific discourse, on the social reality.

The Sociology, as any other mature science, has solid instruments and methods for acquiring useful knowledge, has its own self-regulatory rules for assuring the accuracy of its affirmations, and procedures for false explanations or errors refutation. Sociology, more than other sciences, achieved the level of meta-theoretical thinking about its own practice and sets up its limits and expertise. But if "something is

determined as a limitation, implies that the limitation is already transcended." (Hegel, 1969, § 265, p. 134) And the Scientific discourse of third person should be transcended toward the level of dialectical co-constructed consciousness-reality awareness. The subjective "I", is the condition of possibility for objective knowledge of Science, which, in turn, forms the categorical conditions of possibility for (self-) understanding. If the self-reflexivity is omitted, the rationality involved in social action is misunderstood and limited. A practical example will show how the perspective of self-reflexive social (collective) understanding enhances the classical taxonomy of social actions.

For example, the name of "pro-life" (or "right-to-life") movement is a misleading denomination for a much narrower perspective of a group of people which shares strong anti-abortion convictions. An truly environmentalist would say that it is a deceiving name, as long as so-called pro-life activist don't fight for all life forms, but only for fetuses right to life. It appears as a value-oriented action, but is mostly a traditional-oriented one, based on Christian value of Man who should "have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."(Genesis, 1:26, ESV). Only a self-reflexive enhancement of reasoning could make obvious the instrumental aspect of social action of translating the Bible. Its instrumental aim for serving the anti-abortion or environmentalist perspective is presume in the language which is employed for expressing Man place in Nature. Consequently, he could be "meant to rule over" (NIV), "master" (ISV), "reign over" (NLT), "be [he] sovereign" (WYC), "have complete authority"(AMP) or "be head over"(NLV) to the rest of animals, or he only "rule"(CEV), or "[have] authority over"(VOICE), "take charge"(CEB), "can be responsible for"(MSG) the rest of animal kingdom, a position which implies an equivalent ontological status.

Thus, if pro-life rationale is to be consistent, it should be self-reflexive and integrate entire Nature in its vision. The concern about human life is to care about human as part of nature, hence the Nature itself. These two could not be separated. And this is the point where anti-abortion militants get wrong: that human life is a natural reality, no matter how special it is conceived, and shares the same fate with it. A self-reflexive level of understanding would illuminate many concealed suppositions and inconsistencies of social discourse and reasoning.

References

(AMP) - *Amplified Bible*. (2015). La Habra: The Lockman Foundation.
(CEB) - *Common English Bible*. (2011). Publisher: Common English Bible.
(CEV) - *Contemporary English Version*. (1995). American Bible Society.
(ISV) - *The Holy Bible: International Standard Version*. (1995-2014). ISV Foundation, Publisher: Davidson Press, LLC.
(MSG) - Peterson Eugene H. (2002). *The Message*.
(NIV) - *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. (1973, 1978, 1984, 2011). Biblica, Inc.
(NLT) - *New Living Translation*. (2011). Illinois: Tyndale House Foundation.
(NLV) - *New Life Version*. (1969). Christian Literature International.
(VOICE) - Thomas Nelson (2012). *The Voice Bible*, Inc. The Voice™ translation Ecclesia Bible Society.
(WYC) – Noble, Terence P. (2001). *Wycliffe Bible*.
Hegel, G. W. F. (1969). *Science of Logic*, Amherst, MA: Humanity Books.
Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*. USA: University of California Press.

Biodata

Bogdan POPOVENIUC - Associate professor PhD – University „Stefan cel Mare" Suceava (ROMANIA).
Doctor of Philosophy (Philosophy of Science domain), with thesis the „Antinomies mathematical and transcendental and their destiny in the contemporary Philosophy and Science", he is also licensed in Psychology and has a master in *Psychology* and *Psychosocial Intervention and Psychotherapy*. He teaches courses like *Introduction to Philosophy*, *Introduction to Psychology*, *Social and Cultural Anthropology*, *Philosophical Anthropology* or *Political Anthropology*. Bogdan Popoveniuc has authored two books and two undergraduate courses and published more than 90 scientific articles mostly from an inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary perspective in the areas of Philosophy, Anthropology and Psychology.