

Understanding advanced industrial societies



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Last November, The Times (18 November 2003) reported that S. T.

Microelectronics; the single entity responsible for 55% of our export, had plans to shift 20% of its operations to Morocco by next June. This and other similar trade migrations to ‘exotic’ regions; presumably where labour conditions are more favourable, are laid against the background of a heated debate over the so-called welfare reform (The Sunday Times, 26 October 2003). The cultural realm is also abounding with examples of transition, however the increasing visibility of the Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM) (Bell 2003), in a country whose population; in its outstanding majority, is still declared Catholic (O’Reilly Mizzi, 1994: 369-371), is certainly a most striking instance. Historically, Malta has always held a staunch defense of its traditions. In the visual arts for example, the early twentieth century saw the modernist revolution shoot across Europe like hay fire, even reaching the shores of Australia (Bowness, 1972), yet our local art-scene remained largely oblivious. To this day, monumental figures like Ray Pitre’ earn their keep through the convention of portrait painting, while their avant-garde is left mostly unsold (Wain, 2000).

Notwithstanding our traditionalist tenaciousness, the advent of Globalisation, compounded by the media, information technology and flexible capitalism, is a revolution, which we are unlikely to defy. 1 Early sociology and the concern with ‘Solidarity’. The analysis of change and its effect on social order can be said to be a foundational concern for sociology. The early attempts to challenge the economic concept of marginal utility produced a cadre of theories that focused on the maintenance of social solidarity. Certainly Functionalism has been the perspective, most explicitly concerned with this

problem. Building on Hobbes' ' Social Contract', Durkheim and later Parsons underpinned the ' Non-contractual Element' i.

e. culture, values, norms, etc. Durkheim's concern with the shift from mechanic to organic solidarity can be construed in terms of the threat offered by differentiation and urban anomie to the conscience collective. He viewed religion as the fulcrum of social cohesion in traditional society and proposed that in the emergent ' Organic', secular canon, structural institutions would have to compensate for its demise (Rojek & Turner, 2001: 25-29). Undoubtedly, Marx counters Functionalism in many respects, nonetheless his theory also attempts to deflect the negative effects of change and achieve equilibrium through the communist order.

The concern with fragmentation recurs in his elaboration of Hegel's concept of alienation, in that the estrangement of man from product is intensified with the fragmentation of the process of production (Collins, 1988: 102). Weber also followed Hegel, albeit in the Idealist tradition, most of his theory is essentially a reassessment of Marx, permeated however, with a heightened awareness of the differentiation within, both the ruling and the ruled classes (Bradley, 1992: 14). Furthermore Weber's concern with the trajectory of Modernism is exemplified in his critique of bureaucracy, most notably through the concept of the ' Iron Cage' (Collins, 1988: 467). I have taken this avenue of discussion because I believe that in the era of the ' Postmodern', social theory is still faced with the seminal problems of the effects of change on solidarity and that the debate over these issues should maintain the binaries of a progressive solution. The progression of the

Capitalist order intensified the fragmentary direction propelled by the French and Industrial revolutions (Giddens, 1982: 4).

The basic threat to solidarity lingers on, perhaps beyond the parameters of the theorists that engaged these early challenges, yet the basic Simmelian question ‘ how is society possible? ‘ remains a challenging one (Rojek & Turner, 2001: 68). Globalisation: Flexible Capitalism, Consumer Society and the end of the Nation State. At this point I feel I should declare my bias in that I am an affiliate of a number of local and international Green and Anti-Globalisation movements, hence it is in this vein that I will inevitably present this paper. Globalisation has become a colossal term, it is imbued with multiple and often conflicting connotations, I do not have the space to discuss these implications fully, hence I shall focus on some key features that are most pertinent to the following discussion. On the one hand economists like Klaus Schwab founder and president of the World Economic Forum (WEF) maintain that Globalisation offers unparalleled opportunity to unite the world in a reformed version of modernism.

i. e. one that maintains the sustainability of the liberal capitalist model through reinforcement of the notion of corporate social responsibility (Schwab, 1999: TIME. om).

Chomsky however rebuts the (WEF)’s vision directly with the following, ‘ In their New World Order, the world is to be run by the rich and for the rich. The world system is nothing like a classical market; the term “ corporate merchantailism” is a closer fit’ (2003: 13). I have used Chomsky and Schwab to render my argument because they are major icons on both sides of the

divide, in fact Chomsky is a prominent figure in the World Social Forum (WSF) founded in 2001, in Puerto Alegre, Brasil as a direct antagonist to the (WEF) (Guardian. com).

Nonetheless both perspectives, converge on the idea that the present times are characterised by vulnerability (Schwab, 1999: TIME. com), (Friedman, 2003: 27). It is on this common ground that I would like to further the following discussion. As early as the 60s and 70s Daniel Bell identified economic trends that heralded a significant change in the capitalist order. In the 1970s the service economy soared, filling the void left by the heavy migration of industries to countries with cheaper labour.

In the same manner, white-collar work largely replaced the shop floor (Franceschetti, 1995: 643). Dahrendorf anticipated the 'decomposition' of the ruling class, the managerial/professional class took over the economy, hence knowledge came to the fore as the new hub of power (Giddens 1982: 47). The theory of Post-Fordism accompanied these analyses by predicting a technological turn in production processes towards flexibility, most notably through the advances of the electronic technology (Franceschetti, 1995: 643). In the printing industry for example, digital technology links the computer directly to the printer thus bypassing a number of expensive and complex processes. In real terms this technology made the business more accessible to both the consumer and the investor; thus amplifying competition. More recently Senett furthered that flexible capitalism has fragmented the collective experience of the work force, thereby undermining their bargaining power.

Throughout the 90s, Miller, Slater and Ritzer, echoed the demise of the work ethic by advocating a shift from a production to consumer society.

Similarly Gorz asserts that the leisure market is replacing the 'Work Ethic' in terms of identity formation. (Rojek ; Turner: 159 -160). Certainly notions of 'break with the past' have been challenged quite poignantly, particularly by Marxist quarters (Giddens, 1982: 48-50), yet the point I want to make here is that modern economies became more flexible and volatile. Manuel Castells, working in the vein of his forerunners among which Touraine and Bell, produced an astounding analysis of late capitalism, that not only validates their early observation but magnifies their significance.

Castells confirms Bell's vision of knowledge, qualifying however that 'Informational' knowledge is now the locus of power. In his analysis of the multinationals for example, Castells attributes their rise to their enhanced capability to pursue profit in the global market through the evolution of the communication technologies. Hence anyone holding sway over a 'switch point' in this network wields considerable power (Ibid: 164-166). Furthermore the consolidation of global financial markets robbed governments of their powers to maintain any considerable control over their national economies.

This development is augmented by another major political landmark that separates Castells' study from that of his predecessors i. . the fall of the Soviet Union. It is in this context of relative international political unipolarity and global financial networking that Castells presents the demise of the nation state. He further challenges Weber's political theory through the analysis of 'power nomads', the individuals that control 'switch points' in the 'flow' of information. If Castells' predictions are correct, we could see a

system that is increasingly at the mercy of individuals who do not necessarily form part of those who are traditionally thought of as powerful i.

e. oney/party/status. The effect of these structural shifts is profound and is intensified by the speed at which they are unravelling. ' In a sense, one must conduct social life without a route map, because the contours of the new social, economic and cultural conditions have not fully cohered.

' (Ibid: 160). Culturally, social change is among other things attached to the phenomenon of urbanism. In the seminal works of the early Chicago School, urbanism has been said to engulf its inhabitants in cold dispassionate patterns of social action (Park, 1915: 23-25). With the progression of the theory however, this position was balanced by evidence of the strong ties that magnetise communities and/or subcultures around a common need or ideology (Cohen, 1955: 48- 50). Coming from a somewhat different direction, Parsons saw a similar qualitative potential in the relationships of the ' nuclear family' (Crowley, 1992: 93). So does Giddens in describing the intensity of affective unions through ' Pure Relationships'.

Through these concepts it emerges that fragmentation, may also provide the opportunity for a richer quality of interaction. While on the one hand it denudes the social actor of institutional solidarity, fragmentation prompts strong cohesion on a proximal level; be it affective ideological or otherwise. As the Birmingham School's reading of Gramsci points out however, these solidarities are kept from transcending their immediate bond, and remain enclaves within the wider structural context (Brake, 1985: 3-10). Similarly, Adorno holds that ' Commodity Fetishism' maintains the status quo through

the ' Culture Industries' (Edgar & Sedwick, 1995: 108). This last passage is certainly evocative of Baudrillard's ' Simulacra'! My point of departure from Baudrillard's stance however, is his ulterior affirmation i.

e. that we can do nothing about it (Haralambos & Holborn, 1988: 909-912). Possibilities of the new order, finding our way out of the impasse. As I have mentioned earlier there seems to be consensus that we are living in times of vulnerability.

Environmental decay, pandemics, the possibility of giga-death and the escalation of the Mc World/Jihad confrontation are symptoms of a deep-seated crisis. Foucault reflected this crisis in his work, yet he represented it purely in terms of the Modernist problematic. Certainly it cannot be ignored that we might be at a major moral and transcendental juncture in human history (Van Dusen Wishard, 2003: 6). However we are also facing an inescapable material crisis, for which the rigidly ' Idealist' approach of Postmodernism has little to offer. ' By abandoning the Enlightenment ideals of human emancipation, postmodernism does not merely remain passive before repression, but serves the very reproduction of those repressive practices' (Edgar & Sedwick, 1995: 101).

As Beck points out, ' Risk Society' necessitates that we cohere on the present material challenges (Rojek & Turner, 2001: 41). Brian Turner and Chris Rojek (Ibid) present a cogent social theory founded on the vulnerability of human embodiment. Working through Heidegger's existential concern with ' care' and ' being' and Husserl's inquiry on ' essences' they produce the following postulate: Being in the world is a sensuous experience; since

pleasure and pain require interaction with the environment, hence a materialist analysis of the social is indispensable. Furthermore, 'being' is a social phenomenon, in that it requires existential reflection. Lastly, there is always a tension between 'being' and society, because life is frail and fleeting, moreover the institutions we build to canopy our frailty are themselves flimsy and subject to the whims of the unintended consequence. Upon this platform they reintroduce the humanist conception of citizenship, a conception that offers common ground for global discussion, on all planes; politic, economic and social e.

g. human rights, welfare rights etc. Giddens' and Beck's work on 'Life Politics' becomes particularly pertinent to this analysis, in that it envisions increasing social/political empowerment in the wake of post-work society. The notion of increasing 'discretionary time' upon which 'Life Politics' rests however, has been challenged by what Hochschild calls the 'Time Famine' of the contemporary social actor (Ibid: 170-179). This critique provides an avenue for the upcoming argument, that for micro-politics to become a reality, a radical approach is needed, in that it is not the technology or the economy that we lack, but the system. Rojek and Turner are sceptic of radical theorising, in fact they present their theory as a negotiation of late Capitalism and seem to read Castells' analysis as confirming the conclusions of the perestroika i.

e. that capitalism has won (Ibid: 170-179). In response I quote Gorbachev's plea for an 'alternative to the present system' as late as 6th of February 2004 ([www. barcelona2004](http://www.barcelona2004)) at the pre-Forum debates for the Forum Barcelona 2004 (FB2004).

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I believe that radical re-orientation is not only possible but is becoming increasingly indispensable, moreover as Chomsky puts it most eloquently; Wherever one looks, there is work to be done of great social and human value, and there are plenty of people eager to do that work. But the economic system cannot bring together needed work in the idle hands of the suffering people. Its concept of “ economic health” is geared on the demands of profit, not the needs of the people (Chomski, 2003: 14). Micro politics’ requires more room to be allocated to the social actor in order for the process of empowerment to really take place, it is not enough to state that ‘ Where there is power there is resistance..

. ‘ (Foucault, 1980), it is time democracy be extended to the economic realm (Maheshvarananda, 2003). Perhaps it is not merely a radical shift in the relations of production that we need; like the one advocated by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto, rather this must be complemented by a shift in currency, whereby material gain gives way to the more profound human needs of transcendence and connectedness.