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Structural Perspective in Modern Sociology*

Societies, which pretend to be called and really want to be modern ones, exist in a permanent transformation process. What we usually call a society is a continuous formation process in which very few items can become firmly established. Such permanent changes make problematic the very object, which sociology regards as existing and invariant, namely a social structure. Scientists still try to seize up what does social structure present and how one can study and understand it. Marxist version of sociology defines it as connections and interactions between groups of individuals [1], or as stratum aggregation [2], so, it tends to the old term 'stratification'. According to this interpretation, while asking about a social structure of society, you get a description of group (stratum, class) structure.

Furthermore, the class approach was considered as substantial, or rather essential one and, due to these features, as that of universal explanatory possibilities: almost everything, from geopolitical reality up to usual everyday interpretations, could be reduced to the class determination and class interests of subjects acting in social processes. At the same time, if you rely on universal principles and reduce social structure to society stratification, you, for the most part, ignore both theoretical traditions and contemporary outlooks.

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Imaginary social structure

Sociological discourse about society cannot be regarded as modern if it does not consider the perspective of offered definitions and explanations of the world [3]. In spite of diversity of schools and trends in sociology, after all, most of them interpret reality according to two basic perspectives: structural one and that of action. Meanwhile, some successful attempts related to integration of both perspectives were made in the first half of our century, and the best results perhaps have been yielded by T.Parson's structural functionalism. Rather recent theoretical reconstructions by A.Giddens led to formulation of structuration theory, in which this English sociologist decisively declares an absence of opposition between structure (static, synchronous) and action (dynamic, asynchronous), and insists on the 'dual' nature of structures [4]. Thus, it is not only an activity precondition, it is its foreseen and unforeseen result at the same time.

Society is always a heterogeneous and differentiated integrity. Durkheim considered division of labor to be the most essential ground of differentiation. However, Weber, without taking into account the very nature of its heterogeneity, have told, that individuals act in deliberately structured space, i.e., in the 'social orders': of riches, authority, recognition and glory distribution. Unlike Weber, Giddens understands society as a *becoming differentiation* or *continuous structuration*, in which active agents not only reproduce existing forms in some stereotype way, but also deviate from them and establish new ones.

That is why contemporary sociologists find it more difficult to explain reality if they consider only structure perspective, neglecting any tendencies towards integration of both perspectives. Such an orthodox structuralism in sociology, based on presumption about total determination of individual and group behavior by external for people and communities 'structures', as well as about validity of any universal treatment, is quite explainable, however, its heuristic potential is essentially limited, and its concepts by no means are fully convincing. P.Blau's structural sociology with its systematization and formalism, references, theorems, which relate to social structure, and with its empirical results is the best example of the above-mentioned [5]. The same is true for the action perspective, which distance from 'structural' aspects of relations between communities and separate individuals is growing evidently shorter.

So, such a new understanding of the very nature of reality, which scientists deal with, prevails in contemporary sociology. But it is relatively

new because it was constructed and adopted as legitimate tradition in classic theories and has already shown its vitality and actuality. Now, let us distinguish two aspects in this new understanding. To begin with, division of reality into objects and subjects is not given a priori. This is only a side-line, but not an obligatory product of sociologists' analytic efforts, and its appropriateness is still to be proved. Cognitive potential of reality differentiation into 'subjective' and 'objective', 'external' and 'inner' has been exhausted; at least, scientists' trust in relevance of this differentiation has been essentially shaken. Henceforth, the structure is dual not only in the sense introduced by A.Giddens, but also due to the fact that it exists as if outside of individuals and inside themselves at the same time. This necessary belonging of structure both to the inner world of individuals and to the realm of collective sentiments and feelings is represented in notions like 'agent' or 'actor' acting in society. An actor is one who freely moves in differentiated and stratified social space. This freedom of motion is ensured (according to Bourdieu) by 'habitus' which is an aggregate of internalized behavior standards that determine an individual and group social competence in the living-space, namely, an ability and skills to understand, and make right assessments on what is going on, and efficiently act (basing on these understanding and assessments), an ability to tame social element, easily make right guesses about the stable within various and variable things.

In this case, reality is not a set of over-personal and anonymous structures; it is an aggregate of heterogeneous practices being the main parts of this reality. Today, in various social sciences, on the grounds of special scientific conceptions, there were created different images of heterogeneous reality. A.Gellner, historian, named his book by the basic division of common human living space: a plough (riches), a sword (power) and a book (belief); these three present the main kinds of relations between people and the world (three main kinds of practices) and the basic methods given to people in this world [6]. P.Wagner, sociologist, divides all practices into three following groups: practices of material disposition, practices of authoritative power (practices of dominance) and practices of signification (or practices of symbolic representation) [7]. According to P.Bourdieu, there are two kinds of practices: struggle — aimed to get proper disposition in the network of norms and symbols endowing individual with power; and strategies — aimed to accumulate symbolic capital. The strategies refer to individuals, meanwhile, the struggle is practised merely by groups or organizations [8].

Second aspect supplementing the first one relates to the perceptible and over-perceptible nature of social reality. This aspect is not new; it was emphasized by K.Marx, who wrote of such a nature of goods. In other words, in human world, things, events and processes have some non-material property, i.e., an age long connection with generally meaningful senses; they are material and ideal at the same time. Social structure is dual, because it is not only perceptible and material, it is over-perceptible and ideal too. There has been already admitted in sociology, that people's behavior is determined by not only tangible, resilient and inflexible circumstances (the structure in traditional understanding), but also by notions and values (collective ideas, in Durkheim's terms) adopted in every concrete society.

So, we can repeat after B.Anderson, anthropologist and culturologist, that communities and associations was always an 'imaginary associations' (to some extent), as if they have been previously created by actors to be reproduced afterwards [9]. Sociological tradition presents the same evidences too. Let us remember R.Mills and his «Sociological imagination» and the book named «Imaginary Institutions of Society» (1975) by contemporary philosopher C.Castoriadis [10].

Even superficial review of various interpretations related to the notion *social structure* reveals the perceptive and over-perceptive nature of this phenomenon. Such an analysis is presented in another our work [11]. Here, we like to add only the opinion by P.Sztompka [12] who emphasized the *outwardness* of structure with respect to individuals and its restrictive and directive intentions. He regards social structure as hidden, uncertain network of relations formed between elements of social reality. The only question is what we consider to be elements of reality. To make his answer more specific, Polish sociologist regards four levels of social structure.

The first level was constituted due to the works by Durkheim and by representatives of structural-functionalism school. It is a normative level, a network of external (for individual) regulations, norms, values and institutions ensuring the proper and expected behavior and preventing from deviant one. Normative structure essentially limits actions of actors and seriously affects everything what individuals do.

The second level — an ideal one — was legalized by representatives of phenomenological sociology. It is an aggregate of ideas, believes, images and conventions about reality consolidated in doctrines and ideologies external with respect to human actions. In their everyday life people permanently correlate their behavior with regulative conventions and im-

ages, however, most of these conventions are not apparent and can be hardly revealed by particularly outer observations.

The third level is the level to which usually appeal representatives of exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, behaviorism and network analysis, who interpret action as a basic element of social structure and study interaction networks, as well as mutually directed and mutually rewarded actions of people.

The fourth level was in focus of theoretical researches of Marx, Weber and all those, who studied such subjects as class and group structure of society, stratification and mobility, i.e., unequal access to limited resources and positions in hierarchical structures of production, consumption and prestige. The actors are essentially limited by the very fact of unequal resources localization in the differentiated and stratified social space.

While talking about structure, sociologists, which belong to different schools and adhere different methodological principles, still consider it as something invariant and invariable; something that determines social processes and human behavior, provide them with explanatory schemes and understanding contexts, but is, in itself, so inert and steady, that cannot change radically during historically limited time intervals. Due to this fact, structure is able to remain structure. At the same time, social structure is something to be revealed; it is almost always latent.

In sociology, structural explanations have been obviously asynchronous ones. Such a temporal interpretations are of spatial character, in principle, and cannot be other. Let us remind what P.Sorokin told about social space, as well as the same idea expressed by P.Bourdieu in his conceptual analysis of heterogeneous space presented as a set of 'fields'. Many generations of sociologists measured 'distances' between groups, trying to find the most exact coordinates of social 'positions', studied 'vertical' and 'horizontal' mobility, that is, used the spatial analogies while describing social distinctions. Even consciousness and thinking was reconstructed according to the spatial models: for example, binary oppositions as constructive elements of rather simplified model of reality still applied successfully to describe it. However, there was always another conception, according to which structure was regarded not as something already formed once and forever, but as being continuously settled within individual and group practices.

So, in modern sociology, the specific features of structural perspective can be characterized by following statements.

First, the structure is something existing irrespectively of individuals and groups, something external and inflexible, something that dictates, forces and restricts. And no matter, whether it is considered to be the ideal basis (K.Levi-Strauss's binary cultural oppositions; A.Giddens's 'social regulations and resources' etc.) or material basis ('positions' in production of material wealth, according to Marxism understanding; 'positions' as 'contributions' into survival of society, according to functionalism; 'situations' on labor-market and at concrete work place; 'positions' in distribution fields related to economic, political, cultural, or symbolic capital, according to P.Bourdieu; 'networks' according to Canadian and American scholars studying practices related to resources exchange between social subjects).

Second, the structure is not simply given or settled, it gives birth to various forms of social life, supports them, coordinates and correlates, it is the principle calling forth and dictating all the varieties of individual and collective behavior. Every active society member has to adapt to it, no matter, realizing or not limitations it puts on him/her. Moreover, for separate individual, as well as for groups and population categories, the structure is a kind of condition for their own social identity manifestation or confirmation.

Third, the structure is an explanatory principle; everything can be both reduced to and deducted from it. This is an independent variable being fundamental for a cycle of social disciplines and never losing this status.

Fourth, the structure is a possibilities' matrix of individual and group behavior strategies, namely possibilities to occupy certain positions, play certain roles, enter into equal or unequal exchange relations, as well as into domination/submission relations. The very constellation of living chances almost totally coincides with social structure.

Fifth, the structure is always a certain tension conditioned by unequal distribution of riches, power, dignity and glory, possibilities and perspectives, regulations and privileges inside each of specific 'fields', and in these fields, it is capable to cause conflicts between social agents.

Sixth, the structure seizes and captures individuals; it institutionalizes in *habitués*, i.e., undeniable, apprehended and got into the habit attitudes generating almost automatic reactions on situations: known and expected, and also unusual and outstanding reactions of recognition, identification and classification.

Seventh, the social structure is an aggregate of practices which are mutually directed actions of individuals who use regulations and resources in order to get an access to valued and deficit kinds of wealth.

Variability of approaches to social structure research, up to incompatible definitions and interpretations, seems to violate hand-written and unwritten conventions related to application of terminology by scientific community. Such an impression causes permanent attempts to clear up the notion 'social structure' and define the basic components of structural perspective. However, the impression is superficial; it reflects only opposition and competition of different methods and traditions related to perception and differentiated representation of social integrity in images and models. It happens due to the idea that one of the methods is of a special significance. Nevertheless, what can be regarded as a shortcoming, in wider perspective, is a precondition for looking for relevant methods of understanding and explanation of every possible and relatively self-sufficient reality fragment.

Problematic identity criteria

Identification practices are rather in focus of structural perspective now, but only in focus because there is enough place for cultivating usual schemes and methods of stratification approach outside it; they have proved themselves to be well-working, but still are permanently improving. Identification practices can be interpreted as regular individual and group attempts to occupy some places in heterogeneous space, to ascertain themselves of stability of their belonging to real and 'imaginary' communities, and to find convincing evidences of accordance between 'external' and 'internalized' structures, that is, between social structure and *habitus*.

Global character of today's economy and communications has become the initial cause for permanent changes, that is, for permanent crisis. Thus, the significant changes in sociological interpretation of crisis have taken place for some time past.

We can go on with regarding society as a body (the idea was offered by P.Wagner); in this case, crisis is the culmination of illness or pathology. We can also interpret society as a system and regard crisis as a mass spreading of disfunction, that is, destruction of some functions and suppression of others responsible for normal reproduction of interaction model. However, more and more sociologists are inclined to believe that society is an aggregate of institutional practices (habitual regula-

tions and conventions), so, crisis is a process of *deconventionalization* and forming new conventions [13]. As a matter of fact, it is important not only to get new conventions, but to confirm and to support the autonomy of previous ones, or to reduce it. To be brief, we talk about permanent re-segmentation of reality, which has become a distinct sign of the new society condition.

Such a crisis experience is aggravated due to realization of the fact that control has been lost both over global social processes in this realm (the nearest effect is symbolization, or imitation of practices by individuals and groups) and over reproduction and construction of considerable part of individual and group identities. At least, they say that time is up as to inviolable and firm identities. Whereas till now, identities were formed on the grounds related to professions and positions in public sphere, nowadays they are associated with leisure time, consumer behavior and various images. Identity becomes an object of choice and play, because of disaffirmation of any identity conventions [14]. So, an individual constructs not only one identity, but quite a number of regulated identities which coexist as first-rate and second-rate, as well as predominant and subordinate ones.

We can see identities individualization, they lose their public character and assume an intimate character: an identity becomes rather private than public, because images of 'meaningful others' lose their distinctness and can be hardly recognized, or guessed due to their involvement into the overall process of changes; quite often, they can be even given up being devoid of any prestige and influence. From now on, either act of self-manifestation is to be regarded in the context that presupposes ironical and doubtful asking about trustworthiness of this self-manifestation and causes attempts to try on the other reality, to correlate with it without precluding possibility of the new imaginary identity to be constructed. Identity crisis is a crisis of traditional identity criteria. The main feature of the situation is a lack of generally accepted and obligatory criteria of identification (i.e., activity aimed to reveal and confirm one's identity). Individual and group actors can declare or unreflectively meet these criteria in own identification practices, taking them as regulations and attitude standards of objective identifications. These regulations and their hierarchy are not similar as to the state, group or separate individual: the deepened reality fragmentation correlates with fragmentation and *deconventionalization* of the identity criteria formerly accepted by almost everyone, or at least, by the vast.

However, any modern society can be regarded as just the modern because it provides individuals and communities with necessary resources sufficient for reproduction of identity criteria. Possibilities and chances for self-affirmation in the sphere of consumption and leisure time, being controlled by individuals (let us remember mass, global, as for main parameters, tourism and accessibility of unbelievable volume of information through the Internet), not only give rise to the so called 'new individualism', but become a resource for compensation of losses caused by the process of *deconventionalization* of identity criteria.

On the other hand, social actors have to be quick on the uptake and able to adopt these resources in order to use them in their everyday practices. So, we can regard the identities crisis as a crisis of the previously formed habituses. For some time, individuals feel themselves stricken by such disorder, for not only things have left their usual places, maybe, irreversibly, but even habituses have become problematic: henceforth, they do not ensure unconstrained existence in social reality any more.

According to the exact Z.Bauman's statement, an order, that is, apprehensibility and intelligibility of the world, means that some events are very probable, other ones are almost incredible, and some other ones are absolutely impossible [15]. Crisis is always a period of disorder, violation of usual trend of development and emergence of new phenomena, so, it is a period of 'contaminated' reality, which circumstance naturally causes yearning for purity or, according to Bauman, 'dream about purity'. That's why, the process of identity criteria revealing coincides with constructing new symbolic sphere, new evaluations and schemes of social world understanding, that is, a kind of symbolic codes which institutionalize the senses related to society. Identification practices become classification ones which distinguish between individuals as those worthy and unworthy to be included into community, as 'pure' and 'not pure', as worthy and unworthy of salvation [16]. Usual reaction to the threat of society and community contamination is an actualization of 'purification' practices.

Swiftness of social transformations has always been of great significance because new distributions among individuals and new identities can appear, though people do not realize their emergence, for they have no suitable words to designate them. While talking about industrial revolution, B.Anderson mentions the following: the term 'industrial revolution' appeared later, by analogy with 'French revolution', though steam-engines and machines already worked at full tilt; the same situation was with the nations that had been already developed into integrity

(they had been already 'real'), but got their names much later. They needed to be constructed by 'institutionalized imagination' (the term by C.Castoriadis). It is highly probable that 'real' identities would remain unattainable and would not get their names (remaining latent, inexpressible ones), while 'imaginary' identities, owing to lack of constructive features, would reduce to empty covers, names without contents, designations without designated objects; such ones, being still used, at the same time, are not materials and resources for identification practices any more. In the contemporary world, identities are non-evident; like all the 'structures', they are to be discovered and described by both outside observers and actors, that is, they are to be transformed from 'real' to 'imaginary'. At the same time, public sphere can be full of anachronistic symbolic classifications and identities. So, the purification procedure includes a gradual shift of symbolic classifications and codes, which lost their connections with social world and the world of practices, out of actual contexts to historic ones.

Some individuals are not dependent on attraction of new identities, perhaps due to the heated public discussions on the debatable subject. There will always exist some groups of individuals with absolutely vague ideas about their own identity, as well as those losing taste and inclination to identity criteria search, those being satisfied with the mere self-evident features (such as sex, age, nationality). For them, as Weber have said, the crisis would be the period of permanent existential solitude.

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