

Collective Learning Processes and Social Evolution: Towards a Theory of Class Conflict in Modern Society

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One of the basic theoretical questions in sociology is: why do societies change? Looking back into the history of social thought Karl Marx has given us two different answers, and these answers are still grounding competing views on social change. The first answer says: society changes because people relate to each other in an antagonistic manner; this is the theory of class struggle. The second answer says: society changes because it is continually forced to adapt its normative framework to its environment; this is the theory of the structural strain between the productive forces and the relations of production. The first answer implies an action-theoretical approach, the second answer a structuralist approach. But there is one central problem with this double answer: it is unclear how both are related to each other, what they have to do with one another.

In recent attempts to a sociological reformulation of the old Marxian conception this problem has been avoided by excluding the perspective. The development or change of society is conceptualized as the evolution of normative structures of the system of society. What makes up the difference to Marx, is that this evolution is based upon solutions of the problem of a moral order, not upon solutions of the problems of the domination of nature. This is the main point of Habermas' "reconstruction of

historical materialism". This is an important step in the discussion, but only half the step. For in this reconstruction the main problem of how to relate the class struggle to processes of structural evolution is neutralized. The open problem is how normative evolution comes about. This is my starting point for the discussion to follow: why do normative structures change? My answer will be: neither because of some inner logic of normative evolution nor because of some contextual conditions, but because there is dissensus about the norms that should be valid collectively. This dissensual situation forces those tied to it to learn how to coordinate their antagonistic moral views and convictions. So what I will try to do is to reconstruct the theory of class struggle in terms of a theory of dispute settlement which then can be related to a theory of the evolution of normative structures.

The analytical distinction I aim at, is that between individual moral consciousness, which is a more or less structured set of moral beliefs, and the social processes by which this consciousness is created, destroyed and again reformulated. These two aspects imply different types of "structures": structures defining the moral judgment (e.g. universalization) and structures defining the modes of coordination of differing moral judgments (e.g. communicative procedures of dispute handling).

In disputes concerning moral norms and principles a collective consciousness emerges, a moral world view. Taking into account the analytical distinction developed above, collective moral consciousness is not the sum of many individual consciousnesses, but an emergent aspect of processes of handling disputes. The result can be the generalization of one specific type of moral views; but even this implies a social process, namely the authoritarian imposition of collective morality. A non-authoritarian form of creating a collective moral consciousness implies egalitarian norms of handling moral disputes. Collective moral consciousness is based upon the rules defining those very collective learning processes going on in handling moral disputes.

To put it bluntly: to have a moral conviction is something which is tied to an individual person; to institutionalize norms for moral argumentations presupposes the (at least tacit) acceptance of all concerned. You can change your convictions individually, but you cannot change the norms of dispute settling as you like. You can only change it if the relevant others

will do the same (otherwise you will fall out of the argumentative situation and become a 'fool').

This is the specificity of collective learning processes: that in case of dissensus over moral convictions, over norms in general, a new collectively shared model of coordinating disputed norms is sought for. In collective learning processes the form of settling a moral dispute, not a moral norm, is at stake. In collective learning processes new models of the organization of social relations are invented.

I. Collective learning processes and history

The border case of a collective moral consciousness neutralizing collective learning processes is given in *societies without history*. Especially social-anthropological research has given us a series of examples of social structures whose historicity is destroyed. Society can be represented as a consistent classification system. A society has no history, if it is totally classifiable in the terms of its logic. These societies do not know any antagonisms any more; they, therefore, do not have to learn any more. A similar example is the caste system in classical India whose ideal plan or structure has been identified by Dumont (1967) as being constituted by the difference between pure and impure. In modern societies we also have examples of societies claiming to be based in a stable social structure based on egalitarian principles (I refer to the so-called socialist societies). If this were true these societies wouldn't have to learn too. But this situation is unrealistic, as well for primitive societies (as much recent critique of the classical social-anthropological image of simple societies has shown) as for traditional and for modern societies. It is an image of society which is based upon the suppression of social antagonisms. This is the image of societies - to use the terms of Marx - without a class struggle.

This situation is characterized by the fact that collective learning processes are blocked, suppressed, or appeased. Here change can only be induced from outside, be they demographic changes, changing material circumstances or the crisis-ridden logic of the societal system itself. There are no collective learning processes; there is only a waiting for the "objective laws of history". This stable image of social structure represents a

counterfactual social consensus. It is the *official* version of the structure of society. But officializing an image of society is in itself part of a potentially conflictual social situation; for it is directed against all the unofficial versions of an image of society. Stable images of society are never uncontested. The interesting case is where a potential contradiction becomes a real contradiction, a contradiction between officialized and unofficial versions.

In societies where this contradiction is taken up by political élites on the one hand, by social movements on the other hand, the situation is given which Marx called class struggle. Given this situation, we have *societies with history*. Society is no longer a classified reality, but an action system within which opposing collective actions struggle for the control of the dynamics of society. Societies with history are based upon antagonistic forms of consciousness that set into motion collective learning processes. This antagonistic situation has been handled in different ways in history.

We know today three main answers to this situation.

The first answer was ritual regulation: in pre-state societies the class conflict is controlled by ritual. In rituals a collectively shared model of social organization is being reenacted (e.g. by processes of the ritual decomposition and recomposition of the social order). Class conflict is regulated by rituals.

The second answer was domination: in premodern state-societies class conflict is controlled by political domination. In political domination one class is suppressed by another, a quite instable solution as the history of the classical empires shows.

The third answer is permanent class struggle: in modern societies neither ritual nor political domination are solutions to class conflict. A new structure has to be found for a situation where class conflict seems to become permanent. The answer to this is still open. We are in the midst of a collective learning process concerning the coordination of antagonistic forms of consciousness. I will come back to this question later on. Up till now I wanted to show that class conflict and the dispute related to it is constitutive for the historicity of a society, for having a society with history. This is the reason why I consider the reformulation of the theory of class struggle to be a further step in the attempt to reconstruct *historical materialism*. It looks not only at the normative developments taking place, but it also tries to identify the processes by which these developments are

created and produced. This aspect is not supposed to substitute the theory of historical materialism; it rather presupposes this theory! It is a theory which explains how the normative structures, which are used to react to evolutionary challenges, are produced, created by social actors.

In the following I want to apply these theoretical considerations to historical material and show how this theory might work. I will apply it to evolutionary processes towards what we call *modernity*.

II Collective learning processes and social evolution in modern society

1. *Three steps in the development of moral consciousness*

Since the beginning of the 16th century moral norms start to be based upon a new premise. This new premise is: there is no given metaphysical order any more upon which the rationality of political and social life can be built. There is nothing but the anthropological nature of man. This new premise implies a reflexive structure of moral thinking: for the thinking has become dependent upon the thinker (and his nature) as such. Examples for this radically new departure of moral thinking are Hobbes' *Leviathan* and the radical Puritan theories of the covenant. Both mark in some way the starting point for the evolution of modern collective consciousness. First I would like to distinguish different types of a modern moral consciousness, using examples from the history of political thought and from the history of legal thinking. The examples are taken from a research project on the evolution of political consciousness in Germany in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In the legal sphere the rationality of modern political domination has to be constructed upon new moral grounds. The moral basis of modern political domination is mainly looked for in three main grounding norms of the organization of modern domination: first the maintenance of order (the rule of law) grounds political domination; a second type is based upon the idea of progress which has to be ensured by the state; a third aspect emerges by taking into account the consequences of unlimited progressivism: namely the idea of justice which has to be realized by the state. Order, progress and justice are differing normative grounds for political domination.

The idea of formal legal order founded upon the universalistic principle of the reason of state defines more than a legal norm; it defines an organizational form. This form is the absolutist state which is the guarantee of indifference to religious and social differences.

The second form of grounding the legitimacy takes into account widening functions of the modern state: the legal regulation of an economic sphere which up to now had still been integrated into traditional forms of living. This puts into question the given order; order has to be conceptualized as dynamic, as something which changes itself into the direction of ever more perfection. 19th century philosophy of history is the cognitive representation of this model of perfectionism. Its realization has been the libertarian state.

A third type emerges by taking into account the "social question": this gives rise to a further type in grounding the legitimacy of political domination. The perfect order is not produced naturally; the natural "progress" has to be corrected according to some universalistic standard, and this standard is represented in the idea of justice. The political form built upon this idea is the welfare state.

Collective consciousness in the realm of political domination is defined as the cognitive assimilation of experiences in the legal regulation of social life to the structure of universalistic moral reasoning. This collective consciousness implies increasingly complex procedures of justification. The theories of Kant, Mill and Rawls - to cite the typical representatives of these different types of justifying modern legal domination - are attempts to assimilate the problems of legal-rational domination to the general standard of universalizability which constitutes the very essence of the legitimacy of modern political domination.

This collective consciousness is only one side of the coin; it is the universalism which is realized in modern types of political domination. But there is another side of the coin. All the different attempts to institutionalize universalism as a system of political domination have been accompanied by a defense of particularism. The middle classes try to defend their particular interests against the universalism of the reason of state. The lower classes articulate their particular interests against liberal forms of organizing state domination. Counter-cultural and populist movements base their protest against the bureaucratic

regulation of social justice upon their particular wants and needs.

This constitutes a second level of collective consciousness, not legal, but moral consciousness. Within these reactions we can distinguish between three main ideas grounding a moral order: first ideas of the freedom of thinking, of speech, of association, ground the ideal society; a second idea is the idea of material well-being (for the freedom to do as you like without something to eat is a problem); a third idea is the idea of a good life as the guiding principle of social organization. Freedom, material well-being and the good life are differing justificatory grounds for the rationality of the organization of a social lifeworld.

The experiences defining this collective consciousness are the different attempts at social self-organization since the 18th century. The role of associations is the central source of experiences which are to be represented in the cognitive structure of normative thinking about society. The different types of moral consciousness are defined as assimilations of the experiences with an associative form of living to the structure of universalistic moral reasoning. The intellectual specialists who represent the types of this moral consciousness are identical with those in the domain of legal consciousness. Kant as the philosopher of enlightened absolutism is also the philosopher of liberty rights; Mill as the philosopher of the libertarian state is also political economist; Rawls as the philosopher of the welfare state is also thinking in philosophical terms about the good life.

2. Communicative procedures of dispute settlements

If the theory of the evolution of normative structures in modernity did not amount to anything but such a typology, the result would not be very exciting. One interesting problem is how these two levels of collective consciousness, the legal norms and the moral norms, are interrelated. This is in the last instance a question of the legal institutionalization of moral principles. I do not intend to deal with this problem. There is another interesting question, namely to analyse the differences between normative viewpoints, in morals and in law. These differences I interpret as being given by differences in the rules regulating the empirical application of the universalization procedure. If there is a collective learning process, then we have to look for it

in the development of procedures of coordinating differing moral points of view.

A universalization procedure is defined as the impartial consideration of everybody concerned, as the equal consideration of everybody. The simplest structure of an impartial judgment is through geometric equality. Impartiality gains a new quality when it is defined as giving everybody the same chance to act as each one demands for himself; this is the *equality of chances to act*. A third way to get to impartiality is to distribute chances of action in such a way that you will accept each possible position within this distribution; this is a *Rawlsian conception of equality*. In each case the logical structure of the hypothetical operation of the equal consideration of everybody becomes more complex in a specific sense: you have to take into account the relevant other first as an abstract other, then as somebody in potential dissensus with you, and lastly as somebody with needs differing from yours. The hypothetical operation takes into account on each level additional empirical parameters of an intersubjective situation. The difference then between the moral principles is given by the difference of relevance of empirical aspects for moral or legal judgments. What is at stake here, is the complexity of an argument. What is not at stake here, is the structure of the argument; for universalization remains the same throughout the differences in complexity.

This evolution of moral and legal principles is specific to Western modernization. My question now is not to prove these moral contexts to be the highest stages of all possible moral and legal systems of thinking. I rather believe this to be impossible on the level of moral *contents*.

This is the reason why I try to move the developmental question one step further by asking: why do these normative points of view change? How are these normative points of view created?

My answer is: they are created in a collective learning process which since the beginning of modernity is based upon discursive rules of argumentation, upon discursive structures of dispute settlement. From this *structural* perspective one can distinguish the processes of coordinating antagonistic types of universalistic reasoning as increasingly complex egalitarian communicative procedures. The communicative structure restricting the collective morality to the first type of impartiality,

namely geometrical impartiality, is bound to a *virtual egalitarian communicative procedure*. Not the real people, not those concerned about a dissensus, communicate in order to find a consensus, but somebody does it for them. This somebody, the sovereign, represents all those concerned, and therefore he can settle the dispute alone. This is the early modern discourse.

The communicative procedures allowing for a consensus on the second type of impartiality, the equality of chances to act, imply to communicate really with all the relevant others, but in a specifically restricted sense: you coordinate the egoistic perspectives of all concerned about a dispute. Dispute settlement is a *strategic game of maximizing the own interests*. This is the 19th century solution which today is again revived in the general neoconservative mood.

A collective morality based upon the third type of impartial judgment, the so-called Rawlsian type, implies a real discourse: for in order to coordinate your actions with those of others in a situation of dissensus you have to find out whether your own needs and wants are identical with those of the others. The liberal type 2 solution was based upon the premise that everybody has the same needs and wants, namely maximizing his wealth and status. But this assumption may not be true. So you have to ask the others, with whom you want to coordinate your action in order to settle disputes, whether their needs and wants are different from yours. This implies a real discursive situation.

The result of this structural analysis is a developmental logic that can be described as the implementation of a discursive structure of conflict resolution. The logic underlying the different collective learning processes constituting modern society is the logic of a discursive grounding of dispute settlement.

My central assumption now is: by using this structural account we can describe the change of the collective consciousness as a collective learning process; the production or creation of a collective consciousness is to be conceptualized as a dispute or conflict over antagonistic interpretations of moral and legal principles.

3. Collective learning processes and class conflict

Now I am ready for the formulation (or reformulation) of a theory of class conflict in modern society. Class conflict I define as being nothing but a special case of a moral dispute or

conflict. The conflict that refers to the 'base' of society is defined as class conflict; for the object of dispute is the development of society as such. The dispute is about which direction societal development should take, which cultural model of development will direct the course of development.

Class conflict in modern societies centers – this is the classical statement – around the control of the development of the industrial forces of production. Capitalistic accumulation is a specific type of control of the development of the industrial forces of production. It is based – as Weber has shown – upon a specific capitalist ethic: this ethic is that of a never ending attempt at perfection: it is an ethic where material well-being is the result of individual efforts. Against this capitalistic type of industrial development an oppositional type is constructed in the collective learning process of the workers movement. In the beginning a mere destructive movement (directed against the new machines of the capitalist entrepreneurs) this movement became ideologically articulated, and developed an oppositional collective consciousness, based on the idea of material-well-being for everybody. Thus two antagonistic forms of controlling the industrial development of society were given. This was the class struggle as it was analyzed by Marx.

This industrialist model of class conflict is a historically specific one. Modernity is not identical with industrialism, as some thinkers (even Marx) seemed to assume in the last century. It was itself already a follow-up of another developmental process in society, namely the commercialization of society. Early modern society is based upon the increasing commercialization of agriculture and of a protoindustry (primitive mechanized household production). The princes and the early parliaments in the 16th and 17th centuries tried to control this commercialization process by establishing a formal legal order which bound commercial activities to the positive law of the sovereign. The rising middle classes on the other hand developed an oppositional model of directing the commercialization of society: they postulated individual freedom. Guarantees of freedom versus rights of freedom, this was the ideological representation of antagonistic types of norms relating to the process of commercialization.

The classical 19th century model of class conflict is not only a historically specific one; it also seems to be an obsolete model, on the way to be substituted by a new one. The developmental

dynamic of advanced industrial societies seems to change towards another locus: not the unlimited development of the industrial forces of production, but the programming of the reproduction of society under given material circumstances, seems to define the dynamic center. This is a new developmental process at work in society. Economic programming, cultural programming, social programming are functionally equivalent in this dynamic: there is no longer a well-defined locus of control in society. The modernizing activities of the welfare state define the dominant mode of control of the society to be programmed. The regulative idea of this type of collective action is 'good life'; the programming of a good life makes up the collective consciousness of the new modernizing elites. To this programming of society new social movements are opposed today: these new social movements try to formulate another way of controlling the programming of society by referring to health, to green nature, to aesthetics and so on. This is a new class conflict, represented on the level of the collective consciousness in the different interpretations of the principle of good life.

This conceptualization of class conflict shows *that the parameters, the normative framework of handling the class conflict, change*. This opens up the possibility of a theory of the normative basis of class conflict in modern societies. The normative structure of class conflict must be such that the justificatory principles underlying the types of collective consciousness engaged in it can be disputed at all. The structure of this dispute must be as complex as the collective consciousness making up the dispute. This implies that the logic of collective learning processes which I have identified as that of the implementation of discursive procedures of dispute settlement underlies the development of the class struggle. In order to defend or postulate such highly developed principles like justice and good life you have to accept the implicit discursive structure of these cognitive orientations. Using concepts like justice and good life, forces the class conflict, the handling of historical disputes, to be based upon discursive rules, too.

This implies for the class conflict centered around the most highly developed concepts that radical democratic conclusions have to be drawn. If the history of class conflict follows the logic of collective learning processes then there is in the last instance only one thing that counts: namely democratic procedures of

handling the class conflict of postindustrial societies. The evolution of class conflict can be reconstructed as the explication of the structure of a dispute given the cognitive level of universalistic moral reasoning. When the form of dispute settlement that coordinates antagonistic collective actions breaks apart, historicity is lost, evolution turns into involution or devolution; the historical process becomes pathological.

Historically such a pathology seems to predominate. Class conflict tends to be substituted by the one-dimensional society (to borrow the term from Marcuse). On the one hand there are those who mobilize the moral majority in order to get rid of social antagonisms and the critique tied to it. Fascism radicalizes the mobilization of the moral majority: it offers integrative formulas like racist, nationalist or imperialist orientations. In these formulas class conflict is negated. On the other hand there are those who want to get rid of the class that controls the development of society by terrorizing the antagonistic social class. Examples for this are the Jacobin terror after the French Revolution, the Stalinist terror, the terror of the Khmer Rouge. Without class conflict we have but one class and those who are subject to it.

There are less extreme consequences – and they have another effect. In societies without class conflict system problems tend to define the logic of collective action. In the end we have got societies without history. Here – and only here – the situation predominates which Habermas has called the intrusion of the systemic reality into the socio-cultural lifeworld.

I will try to formulate the quintessence of this theory: if there is no struggle any more the social lifeworld is being sacrificed to the objective logic of system problems. Then social actors aren't able any more to intervene into the developmental processes that change society. Class conflict then is the precondition for the collective creation of society. When there is no class conflict, society is created not by social actions but by the logic of systemic changes.

III Methodological conclusions

Now I want to take a reflexive turn to everything discussed above and ask: what is the critical function of such a theory

vis-a-vis its object? What is the practical function of such a theory?

The theoretical reformulation of the theory of class conflict I presented entails a new model of social critique. This new model of social critique is quite different from the model of social critique characteristic for the enlightened philosopher who already knows what is good for society. I didn't formulate a political theory about the right way of organizing a society. This old model of critique, the so-called practical philosophy of 18th century has not been revived. Neither did I follow the 19th century model of critique as exemplified by the Marxian program of immanent critique. The program of immanent critique postulates objective historical trends (or laws) out of which normative conclusions concerning oppositional action can be drawn. This model still presupposes an intellectual avantgarde that says what is the right thing to do by backing up this avantgarde claim by some objectivistic theory of historical laws. Both types of critique are not adequate any more. You can *neither* presuppose a consensus about philosophical constructions of what the good city is *nor* a consensus about the objective laws of society. Both have been crushed by the development of modern society itself: the emerging discursive structure of class conflict is incompatible with these forms of critique. This calls for a new type of critique. Social theory has lost its claim for objective validity. Social theory is one possible way of interpreting the social world. It is an attempt to decipher the objective meaning of a historical situation. As such it is part of the collective learning processes it reconstructs historically. Social theory as critical theory can't be but an intervention into the interpretations of those who try to find new forms of collective action. Its critique is of a therapeutic nature. And this means that there must be reciprocal communication between professional social-scientific theorization and collective action.

Touraine has called this new form of social theory-building "sociologie permanente", permanent sociology. This means that sociology as a critical social science has to intervene into those collective actions which are represented in the new social movements. And it has to correct its interpretations in a process of continual dispute with those engaged in these new social movements.

As critical sociologists we are not any more the ideological masters of the social movements that Marx and many others in

the last century thought themselves to be. We are only specialists in interpretations – and we can fulfill the critical task only by establishing a discursive situation with all those trying to move society into another direction, with those trying to reappropriate the control of the processes making up a new postindustrial society.