The Decline of the Social

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Abstract

It is impossible to define sociology other than by reference to ill-defined entities like society or the social. Nevertheless, it seems necessary nowadays to ask the question explicitly, whether these referents have relevant meaningful contents. The idea of society has been profoundly reformist or reforming. Wherever the political system has become open and more complex, and state intervention in economic life has expanded, the field of sociology itself has expanded to the point where we can speak of the triumph of a sociological vision of the world. Industrial society was a complete historical construction, defined by a morality, a philosophy of history and various forms of solidarity. The idea of society was never more closely associated with those of production and social justice. Now, we no longer live our collective life in purely “social” terms nor expect social answers to our problems. The decomposition of the idea of society, set off by the fragmentation of the world in which that idea developed, got worse. The current predominance of the theme of globalization has been accelerating the decline of the “social” representation of public life. The time has come to reconstruct sociology, no longer on the basis of what we thought was a definition of the social and of society, but on the basis of the explosion of those ensembles which had been thought to be solid, and of the attempts to reconstruct the space in which subjects can reconstitute a fabric of consensus, compromise and conflict.

It appears to be impossible to define sociology other than by reference to ill-defined entities like society or the social. Nevertheless, it seems necessary nowadays to ask the question explicitly, whether these referents have relevant meaningful contents. Some people might look for other definitions
of sociology, whilst retaining the same word; but it seems to me both less ambitious and more realistic for us to ask ourselves, within the context of the sociological discourse and beyond, what is the meaning of the “social”? At times it seems that the word itself is meaningless, and that the word “society” is only a weaker equivalent to the word “state.” For example, discussing Australian society could in fact be paralleled to discussing Australia. The problematization of such references becomes clear when we consider Australia the continent and Australia the state. Likewise, when we speak of Australian society, we mean to focus our analysis on the central political institutions of that society and not anything else. Nevertheless, we can take this analysis a step further. The notion of society is useful – indispensable, even – when we think of the different components/sectors that comprise the life of a collective and have common aspects which are more important and thus supersede the opposing dimensions within the same collective.

Turning, for example, to nineteenth-century English society, the central components I wish to focus on are industrialization, the labor movement, colonial empires, class relations, the political regime, the educational system. These terms have enough common features and orientations for the word “English” in the expression “English society” to be a direct reference to the unity of the society under consideration. More concretely, it seems to me, when addressing English society we denote that the different aspects or elements of this ensemble are combined together by political mechanisms in the broadest sense of the term – that is, by consensus, compromises and conflicts between social actors who thus become political actors. It is the strength of this political process, be it more or less formalized, centralized, or diversified, which constitutes what we call “society.” It is precisely because of the existence of an English state, of a “United Kingdom,” that we can speak of British society. In an even narrower sense, we have long defined a society, at least in the modern world, by the manner in which the State deals with relations between employers and employees, upper and lower categories. Where these classes or categories are completely opposed to one another, we hesitate to speak of societies; just as we do in colonized countries where there appears to be no integration between the colonized country and the colonizing power.

It is no coincidence that public opinion, whether in a spirit of praise or blame, has often related sociology to socialism – or, more precisely, to social democracy, that is considered the democratic form of socialism which can, under different political pressures, become revolutionary. In light of the latter example, we can stipulate that the idea of society has been, and still is, profoundly reformist (or reforming, if the former terminology is still pejorative for some). Wherever the political system has become open and
more complex, and state intervention in economic life has expanded, the field of sociology itself has expanded to the point where, at a certain moment, we can speak of the triumph of a sociological vision of the world. To be more precise, this moment of triumph can be historically situated in the period following WWII at the time when nation states almost everywhere, although very diverse among themselves, worked out programs of *modernization* which were at the same time economic, social and national, under the pressure of social and national forces. Programs which translated into a plurality of forms were called *development*. A word that was defined more by the past than by the present and in itself conjures a plethora of meanings: the creation of society from unconnected elements, external dominating forces and legacies both social and cultural.

What often prevents us from recognizing the central importance of these observations is that we choose an opposite point of departure, which in fact corresponds better to the origins of industrialization: the social or political rupture which brings a new society to life. It is true that there is never any important economic transformation without the destruction of social, cultural, religious, familial or other forces which used to control and regulate the economy. This rupture is what constitutes capitalism. The first European countries to enter the industrial society followed a very capitalist way of modernization; but from WWI onwards the socialist idea imposed its presence on a large part of the world in opposition to the capitalist powers: in socialist or communist countries, a domineering logic which was both political and ideological crushed the logic of capitalism. The world appeared divided between the masters of the economy and those who mobilized the “masses,” and above all the demands of workers in the service of voluntarist objectives, passionately supported by the great variety of groups fighting against “money.” During a large part of the twentieth century this confrontation between the capitalist camp and the socialist or communist camp preoccupied world politics. Condemnation and contempt were heaped on every attempt to find a less unilateral solution.

Nevertheless, extreme solutions, even if occupying a central place in this analysis, have been implemented to a far lesser degree. Do any properly socialist economies exist? In communist countries we witness a more bureaucratic, technocratic or ideological way of managing the state. One would have to be naïve to think that the Soviet economy was at the service of the Russian people. On the same scale, it is difficult to be convinced by propaganda campaigns which, since the late seventies, have sought to convince us that opening up exchanges and internationalizing production and trade can resolve all the problems of economic and social life. This directly leads us to a study of the institutionalization of conflicts and to the search for the meaningful content of “social” and “society.”
During the first period of industrialization, from the eighteenth century to the First World War, Europe and the countries closely associated with its economy experienced neither the triumph of uncontrolled capitalism nor the omnipotence of voluntarist states. These societies lived through open, violent conflicts between the owners of capital, organized labor and the state. From one country to another the relative weight of each of these players varied. It was in Germany that state intervention took place earliest, because the principal task of the new German state was to make Germany into a great power. On the other hand, it was in Great Britain that the idea of industrial democracy took hold and emerged. In the United States and France, the state intervened in the economy at a later period, due to their preoccupation with more principal tasks; In France, the struggle against the Catholic Church, and in the United States, the occupation of national territory and the integration of immigrants. These differences, important as they are, do not detract from the fact that everywhere the state intervened in work relations that were themselves deeply marked by class struggle. The salience of class struggle is a point of emphasis – that is, the organization of employers and workers as central actors in social and political life. This general type of labor relations led to the attribution of social terms to the economy. Nevertheless, the broad definition of the “social” narrowed quickly. During the first generation, trade unionists dominated parties of the social democratic type; but fairly quickly, in the second stage, the parties won out against the unions. In the third stage, economic internationalization limited yet further the autonomy of these actors who can properly be called social. For all that, employers were not completely dominated by government, and no labor organization completely gave up the class struggle. In every case, social democracy was a conscious effort to simultaneously stop the class struggle from getting out of hand, yet not to suppress it altogether. During the twenties the social democratic idea was even reinforced by the unions’ frequent enthusiastic acceptance of rationalization and “scientific management” as one of the elements which strengthened their action. It was in the Soviet Union under Lenin’s influence that Taylorism and Fordism were received with the greatest enthusiasm, as techniques which would increase the efficiency of the economy and the well-being of the Stakhanovites themselves. But it was in Germany that the transformation of union’s ideas, visible in all the industrialized countries, was pushed furthest as a result of in-depth debates on the relationship between unionist policies and the modernization of the economy.

After the Second World War, a new type of social democracy appeared that was conceived more as a collection of economic and social policies than as a desire to enlarge the scope of collective negotiations. Whether we
speak of French-style indicative planning, of German *Sozialmarktwirtschaft*, or of the British model of Welfare State, we can see in the post war period the progress of the idea that social democratic politics ought to be a central element in the reconstruction of Europe. That reconstruction itself was defined, from the years of the European Coal and Steel Community onwards, as an economic and social project, based on the state, employers and unions, and thus capable of uniting a vigorous capitalism with a labor movement which was powerful everywhere, and with states convinced of the necessity for the social partners to negotiate with each other. The idea of development, acclaimed by all, was defined by the interdependence of economic growth and social well-being. For policies of development, production, distribution, education and the tax system were complementary means to associate economic efficiency and social justice. Development programs also referred to the theme of national integration. The policies defined by these three goals gained the upper hand throughout most of the world, as much in democratic societies as non-democratic ones. Soviet-type regimes sought to be at once modernizing, national and working-class societies. Countries born of decolonization and inspired by ideas expressed by the non-aligned countries at Bandung developed another type of solution, in which the idea of the nation occupied a central place. In Latin America what we know as “national-popular” regimes succeeded in broadening their social base and developing an urban economy adapting to the world; they also reinforced national awareness, although this did not prevent such national-popular regimes from maintaining the gulf which separates participation from exclusion, and well-being from poverty or destitution. But it was western Europe, with the larger Commonwealth countries, which proved to be the principal zone of application for social democratic ideas. The United States, which had an orientation analogous to that of Europe during the New Deal, was the only region of the world to keep its distance from this dominant model, except during the Johnson presidency. Admittedly the history of all these countries could be presented differently, with the emphasis on alternative aspects of their respective transformations. But the common feature of most of the countries at that time was a self-image in which all the various component parts were heavily interdependent.

The above discussion leads us to the following question: how did this model of the political creation of societies, which dominated our world for half a century, come to break down?

The collapse of this “social” model of modernization was the result of the separation of its three main components: (1) The industrial society and, more widely, a society based on production, of which social democracy was one of the main political expressions. (2) The suppression of the controls
and regulations that political society imposed on it. In other words, the return to extreme capitalism, to economic activity liberated from — or deprived of — all social control, destroyed the mode of development where political, economic and social forces were considered interdependent. (3) Finally, the withdrawal of the state into itself, abandoning its role as the central agent in national development, led to the juxtaposition of a heavily state-supported public sector and of a much larger private sector, a large part of which was exposed to accelerated economic change without any protection from the central power.

This general model of development, defined by the combination of economic growth and social progress belonged more broadly to industrial society, and more broadly still to the type of society which organized itself around forms and problems of work and production. The principal actors in social democratic regimes, already named — unions, employers, the state — were all defined by their economic role in labor relations. The combination of economic growth and social progress could not have been recognized as a central goal of a society which defined itself by its mode of production and its forms of organization and consumption, that is, in broader terms of a society which can be called a society of production. The strength of social democratic policies is that they took shape in societies which considered themselves the result of their own production relationships and of their ability constantly to promote new technologies.

In this type of society — from which we are exiting only now — the policies of big business, the political influence of employers and unions, the management regulation of markets, expounded problems of work, employment, wages, etc., as the foreground of choices to be made. Moreover, Industrial society was a complete historical construction, defined by an individual morality, a philosophy of history and various forms of solidarity. It sought, above all, to be a society rather than an economy, state or even a nation.

Nowadays, because we live in a dense and rapidly-changing technological environment, we forget that the classical industrial society, where sociology took shape, was much less a society of mechanization than of management, where the work situation was defined above all else in terms of social relations. It is no coincidence that the emblematic figures of the industrial society, Taylor and Ford in particular, were managers, not technologists. The examples Taylor chose to show meant to illustrate the advantages of scientific management, such as, for instance, a man who carries a bricklayer. These examples, however, had little to do with mechanization whereas Fordism extended these early preoccupations to the level of workshops and factories. Scientific management could be defined as the
invasion of workers’ occupational autonomy (particularly that of skilled workers) by technicians who studied the time and motions of work which could produce the maximum profit for the employers. The central importance given to the notion of “working class” derives from the fact that it meant, at once, an occupational category, a social status, and a major actor in social conflicts. There is no doubt that social democracy was a political force, nevertheless, one which defined itself above all else by its action in favor of the working class, understood in its broadest sense. It sought the union of economic growth and social progress because it wanted to create a society based on the workers, on science and on a drive for social justice. It defined the citizen as a worker, and defended his social rights and political rights at the same time.

This central importance given to social notions in social democratic countries contrasts with the communist idea that a proletarian state could rationalize the whole of social activities. The word “society” was used in the “west” in its full sense: social functions and forms of power were considered attributes of a society, not a political regime.

At the same time, the main social participants – entrepreneurs, capitalists, workers, or social policies makers were better defined by their social status than by their professional characteristics. Never in our history were we more completely defined by our social characteristics. At no other moment were we thought of in more social terms than during industrial society. And the idea of society was never more closely associated with those of production and social justice. Social democracy was first and foremost the management of social conflict and the struggle against workers’ poverty by means of the close association of these objectives, the search for technical efficiency and recourse to the law. Hence, the highly fertile ambivalence in our attitudes towards social democracy.

For many, social democracy sought to be an industrial society in the service of progress and justice but was often also accused of succumbing to capitalism. Nineteenth-century observers favorable to the labor movement coined the expression “social movement.” The fact that the expression is in the singular is highly significant, since it implies that collective action by workers and the movement of historical progress are two sides of the same story; the story of work, a notion which is more central in industrial society than that of money – which, on the contrary, had had a more important place in the first modern societies, and which were more commercial than industrial. When the English Fabians talked about industrial democracy in the late nineteenth century, they indicated (as clearly as did the communists who were just starting to appear) that political and social policies ought to give power and freedom to the workers, since they were the most
productive of all citizens; they were entitled to lead political society by virtue of their role as producers of economic goods and services.

Until our days, certain countries, regions, towns, have borne this social democratic vision of social relationships more than others. Scandinavian countries, particularly Sweden, remain social democratic countries where opposition between parties is supposed to represent the conflict between classes, where state intervention not only protects the sick, the unemployed, the elderly and the unfortunate, but where there also exists wide support of these political and social choices. It is in these social democratic countries too that women have achieved considerable access to power and that solidarity with the oppressed of the world is felt most intensely.

The main industrial countries give their workers and economic organizations a central place in their axis of self-representation as in their social and political life. Workers’ claims, at all levels, from slow down in the workshop to political struggle for the redistribution of the national product were inspired by the consciousness of the central role of labor conflicts. This homogeneity in the social and political field has disappeared. We still claim the right to participate, by our work and by our income, in an economic existence which is more and more internationalized, but at the same time, we claim the right to be different – that is, to keep alive the maintenance or the rediscovery of our heritage and our cultural choices. We do not define ourselves in the same way in the order of means and the order of ends. Many of us find it more and more difficult to put up with having to choose between integrating into a globalized economy and defending a language, a religion or a mode of social relationships. Those who consider equality and difference to be contradictory (and they are still very numerous) live in a state of suffering or revolt. But few of us still ascribe a central role to work activity and social relations of production like we did in industrial societies.

Social phenomena should no longer be analyzed in the light of only one image of social life. The failure of social democracy is inseparable from that expressed in Durkheim’s work, which sought to explain the social purely by reference to the social. We no longer live our political life – and, more broadly, our collective life – in purely “social” terms. Society is a notion which slips through our fingers like sand, when we thought it was as solid as concrete! We no longer expect primarily social answers to our problems, because they are not only social but equally often technological, economic, military or cultural.

The decomposition of the idea of society, set off by the fragmentation of the world in which that idea developed, got worse, and became fatal, when the following idea spread as if along a trail of gunpowder: We cannot choose our future, our political choices are empty because right and left are
equally powerless and dominated by the global economy the functioning of which cannot be controlled by national authority. Social democracy rested on the strength of national politics, on the concrete effects of state interventions which were themselves based on organized labor and on a lively political society. The new discourse about globalization is at the opposite pole of the discourse on social democratic politics. Recognizing the complexity and unpredictability of markets is incompatible with voluntarist politics. Since the mid-eighties, the current predominance of the theme of globalization has been accelerating the decline of the “social” representation of public life.

The theme of European construction, which was more social democratic than liberal, is also losing much of its drive: Its object is above all to bring down barriers and especially to bring the economies of the former communist countries into the European Union; our main leaders are more concerned with this enlargement than with improving the status of workers’ rights, or with making education a measure of reducing inequality rather than a measure that increases it.

Economic leaders no longer insist, as they did in the heyday of social democracy and the European social model, on the social and political determinants of economic growth. Quite the contrary: they only talk about reducing social charges and diminishing the weight of the state. We hear of few people involved in helping to eradicate poverty and see far more preoccupation with stock options, mergers worth billions and the fall of certain stocks in the market, in particular in the new technology and telecommunications sector.

Of course, it is unimaginable that the extreme liberalism’s obtrusive domination will last very long, nevertheless, the abrogation of relations between the economy and society has already been accomplished – at least sufficiently enough to have rid contemporary reality of any reference to the idea of society as the principal framework of all analysis. This is why Europe, still so marked by its social democratic tradition, is more and more silent, has only a limited capacity to take initiatives, and seems to be devoting itself above all else to the problems involved in its management of itself. If we pick up the capitalist idea par excellence that in times of greatest difficulty the economy ought to make itself more independent of all kinds of social and political pressures, that it ought not to concern itself with integration, solidarity and the struggle against inequality, that what it needs above all is investment in new and more profitable sectors, we must recognize that the pendulum has swung to its extreme in the direction of extreme liberalism.

The rise of liberal ideology has been accompanied by a critique of the state, of the excessive weight of its tax burden and of its limited
effectiveness. Indeed, practically every category of the population is dissatisfied with the interventionist state. In all countries inequality is increasing and a large part of the population has the painful feeling of being deprived of the fruits of growth, of being excluded from this modernity which the advertisers praise so obsessively. At the upper limit of society, a new elite of entrepreneurs and financiers prefer the risk and profits of finance capitalism to the management of industrial capital and is getting exponentially stronger and more predominant.

This accumulation of discontents might lead the state to re-examine its role, but there are only a few groups, themselves very much in the minority, who contemplate new forms that state intervention could take. A direct switch from old forms of state intervention to new ones seems impossible, and in the majority of countries the social democratic inheritance is declining or has already been destroyed. This failure stems not only from the dissatisfaction of categories at the top or bottom of society, but also from the fact that the state has become the property of its own employees who often manage to get unnecessary activities maintained, or who oppose the modernization of the state apparatus. The defense of vested interests is often associated with a very radical ideology which helps to defend privileges.

This decomposition of society, and hence of the concept around which sociology was organized for so long, makes it difficult to continue referring to the idea of social movements, at least not without heavily revising the meaning we give to that notion. It has been important, as long as it has referred to relationships and conflicts associated with our economic life. Some commentators have tried to avoid this difficulty by giving the expression an extremely vague meaning, talking about the social movement as the sum of all collective action, extra or para-institutional, as if that exteriority was enough to define the social movements category of collective actors as a whole, although they have always been very different from one another. Such lax usage gives equally meager results whether it is given a tone of protest or reduced to the analysis of marginality.

If we want to preserve the essence of the concept, which is the idea of societal conflicts (calling into question the social use of systems of knowledge, accumulation and morality by which any collectivity operates upon itself, its organization, production and change) we have to recognize that the conflicts which have developed in the recent period are deeply different from those which achieved their greatest force in industrial societies. This is just as much the case for religious or ethnic movements as it is for the women’s movement or “moral” protest in general.

We can see these strong tendencies towards the dissociation of the economic domain from the cultural domain in every part of the world.
This is the consequence, or the logical expression, of what I have called the decline of the “social.”

This means that we have to look for a principle of unity in whose name movements, which are no longer really social, act. If the idea of the subject has come back to life, despite its death being so often announced and prepared for, it is because it has been defined precisely by the individual and collective search for something which binds economic activity and cultural orientations together. Such a combination is not at all impossible. After all, economic activity is of the order of means while cultural orientations are of the order of ends and it is arbitrary to think that ends and means, or even values and norms, are always entirely bound to each other. It is dangerous to claim the right to difference, since this right would destroy itself in the fragmentation of the collective which claims for it. Yet, we can claim our right to combine participation and difference, economic integration and cultural identity.

It is my contention that this last reflection on social movements, however brief, indicates one of the ways in which sociology can survive the decline of the “social” view of collective life and even the destruction of the idea of society. The idea of the social movement, in which we must include the institutional guarantees those movements demand and obtain, could be substituted for the idea of society as it was defined at the beginning of this paper. On the one hand, societies are falling apart: military forces, membership of a religion, technical revolutions carry on with less and less reference to, or connection with, other aspects of social life. And at the other extreme of observable behaviours, we can see that they are more and more associated with unconscious phenomena, or with psychological mechanisms of various kinds, which mean that consumption in its broadest sense cannot be reduced to quantitative data. What is there in common between the world of beliefs and wars and the world of desire? Not much, maybe nothing at all. On the other hand, in no man’s land, that social void which has expanded immeasurably, strategies of reconstruction appear, or constantly strengthen and transform themselves. Reconstruction of society, should we say? Here it would probably be wiser to return to another term which is just as canonical, that of institutions – but understood as the shaping, juridical or otherwise, of guarantees obtained by subjects in order to fight against being dismembered or buried under all the different forms of violence. Perhaps the time has come to reconstruct the ensemble of analyses and interpretations which we call sociology, no longer on the basis of what we thought was a definition of the social and of society, but on the basis of the explosion of those ensembles which had been thought to be solid, and – even more important – of the attempts by individual and collective players to reconstruct the space in which their quality as subjects
can avoid disaster and reconstitute a fabric of consensus, compromise and conflict.