Globalizing cultures: a challenge for contemporary cultural sociology

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Abstract

The present article underlines strikes the necessity of social realism in contemporary cultural sociology. It introduces the concept of "transcultural hybridization" as the most adequate analytical and interdisciplinary instrument for explaining a whole series of sociocultural phenomena as they have emerged from the process of globalization and the postmodern condition. Based at one and the same time on the cognitive and ethical conditions of a "reflexive modernity" and on the analytical value of concepts such as "acculturation," "transculturality," and "multiculturality," it is argued that the introduction of the concept of "transcultural hybridization" necessarily entails a revision of all the categories that have to date been used to explain the socio-cultural dynamics in the era of globalization.

Keywords: *Globalization, transcultural hybridization, multiculturality, cultural sociology*

1. From national to global sociology

The objective of the first part of my paper is to demonstrate that sociology was constituted within the social framework of emerging industrialized national societies, but that during the second half of the 20th century it has been challenged by the necessity to shift towards a sociology of globalized societies in order to maintain its cognitive capacity. The main reasons for that shift were the socioeconomic, political and cultural changes induced by the rise of postindustrial society and postmodern culture since the 1960s due to the impact of the scientific and technological revolution that has profoundly changed our lives in a far-reaching manner (Ritzer, 2007; Bell, 1974; Marcuse, 1964). But, the decisive step within this process was the worldwide installation of the high-tech media system in mass-communication and the Internet since the 1990s (Castells, 2002). Due to that, culture became released from its former social, ethnic and national conditioning, and turned into an important factor of social reproduction in a type of society that left behind it the frontiers of national determination in order to enter into a new dynamic of economic, social and cultural transfer determined by the habits of consumption and the access to the international

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market (Rifkin, 2000). Thus, a new kind of transnational mass-culture became the relevant factor in the social construction of new life-styles and identities (Giddens, 1990, 1991). It is not surprising, therefore, that this social fact also affected contemporary sociology forcing it to adapt itself to new objects and objectives related to postmodern culture (Alexander, 2008; Smith, 1998). The so-called postmodern threat (Vattimo and Rovatti, 1988) is, seen in that way, part of the scientific revolution itself insofar as it turns culture into a system of symbolized knowledge that influences social reality. Compared to the situation in the 19th century, today's sociology is no longer an exclusive fountain of social knowledge within a highly non-conceptualized, apparently anarchic social reality; today it can be said, that sociological knowledge is part of an integrated web of a culture of information produced and diffused worldwide (Robertson, 1992). Sociological knowledge is no longer exclusively the property of experts; on the contrary, it has become part of today's daily life-culture, disseminated, interpreted and even manipulated by the mass media and by power-groups. This means, that contemporary sociology has to recognize that not only has its object of cognition changed, but that it is also necessary that it adapt itself to the new reality with a new strategy of knowledge. This includes also cultural sociology, as Reckwitz (2000) and Alexander (2008) point out from different perspectives. Postmodern sociology has become different from the former sociology of modernity. Modernity itself has surpassed its fundamental postulates established, defended and developed by capitalist economy as the structural framework of meaning. Due to the new economic reality that was a consequence of the global transformation since the Second World War, based as it was on the marketing of the recent scientific and technical revolution, in many aspects culture was seen as a myth (Bueno, 1996), an anachronism that had to be deconstructed in order to define the significance of culture in a globalizing world (Bundesministerium, 1999; Inglehart, 1998; Featherstone, 1995).

Contemporary sociology is facing some profound changes of its object, which is the structural and cultural constitution and development of society. The reason is obvious: inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment, sociology was founded in the 19th century to analyse and conceptualize the rising industrial societies from a rationalistic perspective. Accordingly, sociology became an important science of modernization and modern society. As the history of sociology demonstrates, it was created and developed as a discipline that focussed on modern society as national entities which developed as nationally constituted objects of cognition. Social phenomena were, above all, studied in the context of national societies, although transnational comparisons were possible. But, in so far as sociology went beyond the observation and analysis of nationally defined social processes, its theory reflected the nationally constituted social reality of its object, thus becoming a part of it. Its aim was a specific explanation of the modernization of societies constituted as nation-states. It analysed the enormous variety of phenomena produced by or related to the grade of industrialization of a developing society, a nation-state, of mass-culture, and democratization, thus furthering education, social equality and gender-relations. Beyond that, modernization also included the dissolution of the national barriers of social and cultural processes: it led to globalization in consequence of the inherent logic of its socioeconomic constitution. Sociological concepts are realistic ones; they were shaped and theorized in order to reflect the social reality of a specific period of development mainly of western society. They responded to the fact that social reality is historically formatted by the dialectics of productive forces and productive relations, of social and mental dynamics. As Marx and Weber pointed out, modern Western societies developed a capitalist type of socioeconomic structure and its corresponding ideological and political superstructure. Both prerequisites have changed decisively,

although we cannot say that the logic of the capitalist system itself has changed. Although the globalizing society is not a new historical phenomenon it responds to a series of social, political and cultural contradictions that induce new dynamics, especially where culture as an instrument of social development is concerned. This fact has become important, for example, in Samuel Huntington's thesis of the "clash of civilizations" (1997) in order to defend western supremacy with the aid of "Western universalism" in culture.

Now, my point is to demonstrate that this period of industrial capitalism ended shortly after the end of Second World War with the economical reconstruction of Europe. In sociological analysis, Talcott Parsons monumental structural-functionalism might be considered as the most emblematic expression of industrial society and the theoretical climax of its theoretical reconstruction during the 1960s. But the symptoms of a decisive structural change in western societies became boundless: social theory was no longer able to explain social reality within the conceptual framework of industrial society, and the need for new paradigms became evident. The point was that Parsons (1951, 1971, 1975) explanation of culture as a strategic normative system guaranteeing pattern maintenance and conflict management responded rather to the needs of fordistic labour organization than to the necessities of social reality in democratic societies and open market situations. The social organization of society was no longer the exclusive consequence of the necessities of the productive system but, on the contrary, the outcome of immaterial factors such as knowledge and information. That is, in most western societies, the service sector and culture were seen as strategic elements for social development. Soon, the critical sociological view on changing reality became related to flexibility, consumerism, cultural diversity and individuality. Numerous sociologists have reacted to the challenge by pointing out the structural change in capitalist society due to the growing influence of the service sector and cultural factors in social reproduction. This was the case of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), or Herbert Marcuse's famous *One Dimensional Man* (1964). And in 1969 Alain Touraine introduced the concept of "postindustrial society," and also Daniel Bell did so in 1974 proceeding from some of his observations published in *Work and its discontents* in 1956. The end of industrial capitalism, with its mass-oriented fordistic labour organization, and the rise of the new flexible, post-industrial economics made possible the postmodern turn towards the analysis of the impact of culture in advanced societies and their influence in the status groups and new life styles, as Weber had pointed out half a century before. For all these reasons, Sociology had to redefine its object of analysis as well as its methodological approach to account for the ever-changing reality.

In short: in the two decades from 1950 to 1970, the object of cognition in sociology changed decisively and it was no surprise when Alvin Gouldner −in spite mainly of the crisis of institutions produced by the new youth culture and the raise of Welfare State− brought up the danger of "the coming crisis of western sociology" (Gouldner, 1970). Influenced by the unusual questions made by Paul Kuhn (1962) on what sorts of ideas and strategies of thinking are adequate to each historical period, followed by Paul Feyerabend's (1975) heretical defence of methodological pluralism and epistemological relativism, the poststructuralist perception of social reality from the cultural perspective also caused a methodological turn, renewing the principles of critical qualitative sociology, based mainly on the work of Schütz, Weber and the Frankfurt School. In accordance with them, Berger and Luckmann published *The Social Construction of Reality* in 1966, in order to establish the foundations of a more adequate sociology of knowledge: social action is not simply the execution of generally accepted and imposed "objective" social standards, it is rather the social construction of reality

by individual actors within a shared frame of reference and assumptions.

As we can see, the transformation of western societies between 1950 and 1970 had confronted sociological analysis with a historically new object of cognition which had to adapt in order to maintain its capacity to produce objective knowledge of social reality.

2. The ambiguity of contemporary cultural dynamics

In a second step, special attention will be paid to the consequences of that paradigm shift in the case of the analysis of culture within globalizing society. But this shift would not be really understood as a necessary step in sociological analysis without taking into consideration the substantial difference between the structural and cultural spheres of society (Archer, 1996). The cultural aspect in contemporary globalizing societies has to be seen, therefore, as a relatively autonomous process related with social agency. Culture does not simply "reflect" social reality; it rather produces new meaning that induces social change. For that reason we can say: the myth of national culture has definitely died due to the transformation that take place within globalizing societies.

During the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, a nationally shaped sociology defined culture mostly in an anthropological manner as the compound of all those material and non-material (ideal) elements that guarantee social cohesion and collective identity of human groups. Parson's concept of culture and its function within the general social systems revealed the inadequacy of this theoretical approach to culture. Nowadays, culture is seen rather as a polymorphic symbolic dimension of social construction and reproduction in multicultural and transcultural societies. Today culture is handled as the symbolic representation of what is seen as the meaning of globalization. Globalizing culture means the worldwide acceptance of international law and value standards, currencies, education, fashion, nutrition and other habits. But it also represents in a symbolic way cultural diversity as part of the international market, as for example in language, literature, music and art. Therefore, sociology has to explain not only how globalization and cultural diversity fit together, but also what kind of social processes make them work.

2.1. The challenging character of today's culture

The new polymorphic cultural dynamics become of interest to social scientists and provoked a vast and polemic diffusion of concepts that range from particularistic global republicanism (Beck, 2006; Habermas, 1997, 2000) to the euphoric cosmopolitan/universalistic globalism defended by neo-liberals. But while the first (leftist) concept designs particularism within a cosmopolitan perspective of equality in diversity, the second (rightist) one shapes its universalism in an ethnocentric way as the supremacy of western civilization in the world. The first one focuses on a new world order, on the supremacy of politics as an instrument in order to design a sustainable economic process, an international culture of power based on equality and social justice; the second one, following the ideas of Friedrich von Hayek (1944) and Milton Friedman (1962), starts from the rapid elimination of the difference between the political and economical spheres, the accelerated submission of the public under private interests, and cultural homogenisation related to occidental civilization and powered by expansive capitalism. For that reason, postmodern sociology has to analyse cultural dynamics within this field of controversial tendencies and intentions. Although the present globalization reminds one in many aspects of what Lenin called in 1916 the "superior stage of imperialism," i.e. globalizing monopolistic and

expansive capitalism, there is no doubt that it is the revolutionary development of science and technology as productive forces that have changed not only the earth, but also the minds and habits of the people. As Ernesto García Canclini writes, "together with the homogeneity that produces the circulation of capitals and goods, new cultural differences arise." And he notes: they do so "not as simple resistance to the global" (García, 1999: back-cover). This means that globalization has to be seen and analysed not only as the world-wide imposition of flexibilized capitalism, but also as the process where culture becomes an important element of particularity and a space of new symbolic production that shapes the social structure in all societies: the old national cultures become simple elements of a world-wide transcultural process.

2.2. The changing significance of culture in Western sociology

Wolfgang Welsch, in an article published 10 years ago, proposed the concept of transculturality as the most appropriate to most contemporary cultures. He demonstrated in what manner this concept arose, in consequence of social change during the last two centuries.

2.2.1. The nationalist concept of "single cultures": cultures as islands (assimilation and/or segregation)

In the late 18th century, influenced by the Enlightenment, culture became a concept that referred to the national constitution of society rather than to individual excellence. It was interpreted as the mirror of human groups, at the same time as a criterion for their differentiation and segregation. Culture was considered to be an expression of the singularities of the nations, their intrinsic value, based on the "soul of the people," as Herder wrote. Welsch characterises this concept by three elements:

- social homogenization,
- ethnic consolidation,
- intercultural delimitation.

That means that "the traditional concept of culture is a concept of inner homogenization and outer separation simultaneously." (Welsch, 1999:195) This concept of culture as "of the people" easily became the ideological foundation of nationalistic cultures and their mutual separation. Culture united certain people in order to separate them from others. The definition of what is to be considered "us" and what "the others" is merely fictitious and imaginary. As Benedict Anderson (1983) said, nations arose as *imagined communities*; and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) made clear that this imaginary act used to be based on the *reinvention of tradition*. This is what we could call the nationalist concept of culture.

Although the concept of singular culture still persists due to its ideological reinforcement of nationalism as a political instrument in order to impose collective consciousness and social integration in ethnically and culturally different societies, it became evident that it is not valid in sociological analysis. It is not valid, because it considers culture as an instrument of unilateral *assimilation*, which means it destroys cultural and ethnic diversity under the pretext of homogenization. In addition, assimilation is often narrowly related to inner and outer segregation of societies and a permanent reason for social and political confrontation.

2.2.2. Acculturation, interculturality, multiculturalism

Social and/or cultural isolation only work temporarily and under specific conditions. The history of modern society has demonstrated that each society and each culture

only develop due to their permanent and growing entanglement with "the others." Unity through diversity means that any modern non-tribal society has to be able to establish useful relations with other cultures. This fact is expressed in concepts like acculturation, interculturality and multiculturalism. All of them do not resolve the problems created by the concept of single culture.

As it is well known, **acculturation** refers to the process of integration of such cultural elements that are foreign to any given culture. This process very often works spontaneously and is based on the utility that foreign cultural elements might have for one's own cultural management or on the process of learning in general: people accept cultural elements of "the others," because they enrich their own cultural and personal experience. But in many cases, acculturation is the effect of imposed culture, of a cultural manipulation of power relations, as we see in the case of colonialism or ethnocentrism.

The concept of **interculturality** refers to that situation and reflects those cultural acts which intend to establish institutionalized binational or international relations between the single national cultures. Examples are: fairs, festivals, cultural agencies, games, artistic events, educational programs, etc. Their objective is to seek "ways in which such cultures could nevertheless recognize, understand and get on with one another" (Welsch, 1999:196). Hence, interculturality reveals the latent conflict between national cultures.

The concept of **multiculturalism** is very similar to that of interculturality, but it refers to conflicts that "different cultures have living together *within one society*" (*ibid.*). As Welsch points out, multiculturalism expresses the fact that single, homogeneous cultures establish themselves as micro-national units within the national frame of a given society. Also, in this case, the traditional concept of culture as an autonomous isolated social fact prevails. Multicultural societies are combinations of national/ethnic units that tend towards a parallel existence including separation and *ghettoization*.

Postmodern societies tend to be multicultural societies due to the facts of migration, communication and education, but they maintain the germ of cultural, social and even political division as far as cultural segregation is maintained as the consequence of an essentialist interpretation of cultural differences.

As we can see, interculturality and multiculturalism are only reactive concepts of cultural change within a world shaped by the idea of a separated, monolithic and isomorphic national culture. But today's global reality points less to separation than toward exchange and interaction. Today's cultural dynamics no longer express social and national separation; they rather indicate the necessity to rebuild our social systems in accordance to the global impact of culture as a determining element of human evolution.

2.2.3. The concept of postmodern culture (the loss of national exclusivity): transculturality, hybridisation, transcultural hybridisation

Post-national cultures are cultures that are generating new cultural forms that express new social spaces of cultural experience (Featherstone and Lash, 1999). These spaces are the consequence of social relations that characterize social reality in postmodern society and allow transcendent cultural production and experience (Alexander, 2003). Today, cultural experience depends less on the kind of national culture one belongs to, than on the social position he occupies in the international system of labour-division, professional attitudes and related life-styles.

These new spaces of cultural production and experience are the consequence of a new life-style that is not limited by borders of national culture.

On a **macro-sociological** level, transculturality is characterized mainly by three social facts:

— Firstly: Today's cultures are the consequence of interpenetrating cultural processes that lead to the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures.

— Secondly: Today's cultures develop within and due to the external cultural networking: no culture can maintain itself separated from the others. Postmodern lifestyles transcend the borders of national cultures, to merge with those of other cultures. It is more significant what someone is doing, to what kind of professional group they belong to, whether they are a technician, a doctor, a journalist or an academic, rather than to which country they belong. The national aspects of cultures have become secondary and now transcultural manifestations develop, reflecting the socially more significant reality of life-styles. These new social facts are mostly the consequence of three global processes: the expanding migratory processes, the worldwide impact of communication systems, and growing economic interaction.

— Thirdly: Today's cultures are characterized by hybridization, as every culture has to deal with all other cultures. All cultures are exposed to the impact of the other cultures and must respond by their own means, and for that reason they have to synthesize cultural forms according to their own necessities. This fact requires the capacities to transcend the national definition of culture and to establish hybrid forms that express the reality of new social relations and life-styles. The "other" is no longer an external point of reference, but a dynamic aspect in the definition of one's own identity.

Transculturality also influences the **micro-level** of individual identity. Globalization has brought the people physically and mentally closer than ever before. Modern life-styles are a compound of experiences of different social worlds that are blended into new forms of individual identity. These "cross-cutting identities," as Bell wrote, have turned into a mass-phenomenon that influences the daily life of a great part of society. It is important to recognize that it does not fit into the concept of national identity and requires one to differentiate between a civic and a cultural status or identity of any given person: someone might possess a French or Swedish passport, insofar as they belong to a politically constituted collective, but their cultural identity might be more complex and express their civic right to differing cultural interests.

This means, that cultural identity is no longer an heirloom that is got through nationally defined and controlled socialization and enculturalization. It is rather the consequence of personal decisions induced by the growing opportunities of experience and integration of other cultural elements into one's own cultural identity. The cultural determinants have become transcultural.

2.2.4. Some of the main consequences of transculturality

a) The political system is no longer able to control social cohesion with cultural instruments and for that reason transculturality is seen sometimes as a threat to national integration. Culture becomes an element of individualizing transcultural identity construction: language, religion, habits and beliefs are no longer elements of collective identity. Today we are eager to admit that everybody has the civic and human right to speak and read in any language they want to, to believe whatever they want to believe in, to listen, to write and to do what they consider fitting for their personal life.

b) The cultural system of any society becomes a very complex and diverse compound of possible decisions. Monolithic cultures with their necessary uniformity are reshaped in a differentiated system of elements available to individuals and social groups in

order to define themselves.

c) The social system loses one of the main elements of coercion in modern society. But, if we recognize that modern culture was shaped as an instrument to foster particularism and establish a universalistic frame of reference in order to guarantee social integration of nationally constituted societies, the present tendencies towards cultural individualization include the danger of changing the particularization into a threat for social solidarity and cohesion. For that reason the maintenance of cultural patterns as guidelines for collective behaviour needs new points of reference that are more complex than the national culture, that express the transcultural aspect of contemporary life and individual rights, at the same time establishing collective values on an international level. Culture has become an important aspect of international political affairs insofar as the necessary reference frame of social behaviour has to be set within an institutional network of the global acceptance of human rights and international standards of law. Culture can only be understood as the heritage of mankind insofar as it is preserved in its diversity. But culture is not created to enrich that heritage, but rather to express in a convenient and productive manner the necessities of humankind in its struggle for life. This is why changing technical and social realities produce new cultural realities that respond to the necessity to integrate the social and the mental as a response to global change.

3. Conclusion

We have seen that the Herderian idea of national culture as the foundation of modern society is no longer relevant due to the intrinsic dynamics of modern society and that it has made way to new considerations which better respond to the social reality of postmodern society and the significance of culture as its symbolic dimension.

Contemporary sociology has to respond to the transformation of its object, regarding society and culture as a dynamic historical compound. It has to adapt its concepts to the new reality of globalizing societies and the changing significance of culture in people's lives.

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