

Part I

Introduction



Transformations in the Multiple Domains of a Turbulent World

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Introduction

Throughout history, the primary concern of many individuals, groups, communities, organizations and societies has been not to transform their social universe, but far more frequently to try to stop, contain or stabilize change, and maintain social order, often within the framework of relationships of power and domination. Prime examples of this are: the rules associated with kinship structures; the continuing struggles to preserve patriarchy; the role of religious authorities in the integration and protection of a system of values, beliefs and rites; the role of the state in the protection of property, and production- and trade-related conditions; and processes to maintain a political order through civic command and obedience relationships. Hence, many actors, networks and communities have tended to activate the *stabilization* and *reproduction* processes of social forms and practices, and impose through 'common law' (Durkheim, 1893, 1933) related requirements on members of the concerned social entities. Anthropology, sociology and political science have assigned considerable importance to the problematics of *stability*,¹ *equilibrium* and *reproduction* in an attempt to understand how social life is organized.

At the origins of sociology, however, the issue of change was paramount. The founding fathers of the discipline in the nineteenth century faced an ever-growing contrast within their societies. On the one hand, they experienced the extreme stability seen in many rural communities with age-old millenary traditions 'dominated by social and cultural mechanisms of reproduction' (Touraine, 1984: 14), the types of community that travelogs, and then anthropologists, described in faraway lands. Yet on the other hand, they were confronted by a world that was undergoing profound change, from the political instability in Europe, triggered by the French Revolution, to the technical and socioeconomic upheaval of the Industrial Revolution. They tried to account for this huge disparity through an evolutionary perspective by seeking 'universal laws' governing change, along with solutions to the attendant traumas. The social sciences were therefore assigned a far-reaching mission. Today we know more modest ambitions are in order.

The extraordinary scope and diversity of social phenomena cannot be dealt with (as Popper would say) in a singular, 'totalist' manner, and we cannot reduce transformations in the social world to a few universal laws.

We need to recognize (1) that social transformations result from a multitude of individual and collective actions which generate highly diverse processes that redefine social life and what it produces at various levels and in different fields in space and time; and (2) that these transformations far from being independent are often deeply intertwined and lead to other significant changes. A few examples of such transformations point to their complexity and potential impact: the arrival of new generations and migration flows; the redefinition of gender relationships; the rise of social movements; the emergence of innovative or 'deviant' discourses and practices by individual or collective actors; the diffusion of scientific discoveries and technological innovations; the implementation of new public or private policies; the decline of an important institution; economic developments or crises; the failure of political regimes; revolutions; and changes induced by internal or external armed or unarmed conflicts.

Social Transformations and Social Fields: The General Approach of the Collection

This collaborative work presents theoretical and substantive analyses of contemporary social transformations through a meaningful and selective collection of essays exploring the transformational dynamics specific to various domains of social life. The goal is not to cover every single domain of sociological research, but to mirror the diversity and variety of transformations under way in today's societies and transnational spaces and help us understand what is happening in our lifeworlds, work lives and frames of social existence.

Sociologists, who are mindful of the reproduction phenomena to which considerable research efforts were devoted in the 1960s and 1970s, are more inclined today to acknowledge that the social world is in constant movement, in 'intensive and perpetual self-transformation' (Etzioni, 1968: viii), and that this, as we shall see later, applies to all social fields. We are living in a world marked by all manner of fast, continuous social changes that affect the lives of individuals, families, communities, organizations and systems, nation states and international networks, which, owing to their practices or operations, are the sources of these transformations. The radical emergence of what Bauman (2000) called 'liquid modernity', where competing social forms, values, standards, practices and lifestyles are in a constant state of re-composition, fundamentally commits sociology to being a science of change, and hence of movement, time, mobility and complexity (Touraine, 1973; Giddens, 1984; Sztompka, 1993; Urry, 2000, 2003).

Taking this conception of social life being in a state of permanent transformation as their point of departure, the authors in this collection examine the

dynamics of *social fields* rather than social totalities such as specific societies. The general idea is to show on the basis of *specialized research* the contingent paths taken by social actors to resolve problems – in various fields and at different levels of interrelationships – with which they are confronted in this complex, shifting social world. From this perspective, this collection is not meant to provide a unified macrosociological portrait of social transformations even if references to the major transition from industrial society to new types of society are made in a metanarrative fashion: post-industrial society, information society, knowledge society or network society. In fact, a more pressing issue is how to take globalization into consideration, which as we shall see later on, transforms the sociologist's perspective, given that today it is more difficult to confine research to the traditional boundaries of individual societies. Globalization here is interpreted from an evolutionary perspective, as an accelerated transition from the Westphalian world of nation-states (Guéhenno, 1995, 2000) to a globalized human society through the intercontinental extension of interdependent networks whose ties are forged through a multitude of flows (Keohane and Nye, 2000; Held and McGrew, 2004; Sassen, 2007). The chapters in this volume show that if we choose to approach transformations in our social world from the perspective of social fields, the processes associated with globalization represent just one of many dimensions to be considered. We should therefore spend a few moments examining this approach, which reflects the research practices of a large number of sociologists and more generally social scientists.

Social fields and research

Social fields are identified by way of two partially related processes. The first is the process of the *differentiation* of social activities throughout history in autonomous spheres, such as the differentiation of art and religion analyzed by Weber (1978, vol. I). The second process involves the social construction and progressive institutionalization of a relatively large number of research fields under disciplinary specialization. This process has led not only to the significant broadening of the corpus of sociological thematics in recent decades but also to the fragmentation of knowledge (Gulbenkian Commission, 1996; Wallerstein, 1997; Quah and Sales, 2000).

With respect to research practices, we should consider Bourdieu's definition of social fields as 'relatively autonomous social microcosms, i.e. spaces of objective relations that are the site of a logic and a necessity that are *specific and irreducible* to those that regulate other fields. For instance the artistic, religious, and economic fields all follow a specific logic' (Bourdieu with Wacquant, 1992: 97, italics in original). This relational space is metaphorically related not only to a network but also to a game in which relationships of power are established among the 'players' on the basis of the species of capital they use in the struggle to maintain their position. Fields are spaces where change is ongoing and as a result 'it is the field which is primary and

must be the focus of research operations' (Bourdieu with Wacquant, 1992: 107). A social field is associated with modes of grouping, forms of organization and the achievement of goals and functions that generate issues, discussions, debates, modes of regulation, mobilization of resources, conflicts and struggles. Although fields have their specific logic and are relatively autonomous, they are still interrelated and exhibit dialectical relations, which sometimes renders them indissociable in their movements, as can be seen with the private and public fields.

Social fields and theory

As shown in many of the chapters in this volume, sociological work today no longer puts theorists and researchers in stark opposition to one another. Those who are oriented toward macrosociological theory conduct research on specialized topics, whereas those involved in field research focus on testing general theoretical statements or more specifically developing theoretical models directly related to their field. This work generally leads to what Sztompka (2000a) labels 'Explanatory Theory', which provides 'explanations or at least models allowing better organization of dispersed facts and phenomena, interpretation of multiple and varied events and phenomena'. In addition, a specialized field of research today is not necessarily built around perspectives defined within a single theoretical current or a single paradigm. As Susan McDaniel shows in her chapter with regard to transformations within the family, researchers need to call many perspectives into play (in this case, feminist theory, 'late modernity' conceptualizations) or devise more specific analyses to try to open up the field by connecting it to 'other social systems', thereby shedding new, brighter light on the topic and process under study. This collection also shows that specialized research often overcomes disciplinary barriers. Through a process of 'hybridization' (Dogan, 2000) multidisciplinary approaches can prove more productive than the systematic use of a single disciplinary theoretical model, even if testing the theory remains essential.

About Chapter 1

I have divided Chapter 1 into two main sections. The first section briefly discusses a series of general questions related to social change and ways of approaching social change: Why do we need to differentiate between change and transformation? Is the sense of the acceleration of the speed of change something new? What patterns and mechanisms of change are involved in the structuration and destructuration of models, organizations, institutions and social systems? To what extent have globalization processes called into question the societal approach to the study of change? The second section provides an overview of the different chapters and their contribution to our understanding of social transformations at the turn of the twenty-first century.