CHAPTER 15

The Dialogic Turn in the Social Sciences

Dialogic Societies

Present-day societies are becoming increasingly more dialogic. Just as the industrial societies constituted the material context where political democracies developed, the informational societies constitute the symbolic context in which dialogue is penetrating social relations, from international politics to coexistence within our homes. Sociological analysis finds dialogical transformation in all fields. It is possible that this does not occur with respect to the values of the researchers who carry out the analysis, but it is clearly revealed when comparing today's relationships with those that took place in the same spheres during the premodern or industrial periods. This analysis also discovers values in society, which are increasingly more dialogic, as well as a progressive correlation between these values and the dialogic transformations they help propel.

Descriptive sociological analyses show that dialogue plays a greater role now than in the industrial society, and an even more considerable one than in the premodern societies. Before the American and French revolutions, the king, whose power emanated from God, was the one who decided who governs. Now, in an increasing number of countries, the head of the government and/or the head of state are elected by the votes of the citizens. During the first half of the twentieth century, marriages functioned in accordance with the roles that were traditionally assigned to the different genders and ages. In the twenty-first century, an increasing number of couples continually dialogue and renegotiate the tasks each person is supposed to perform.

This dialogic movement has considerable limitations, as we can tell from the powerful groups that condition the vote or from the large number of women who endure relationships that are imposed on them. We can distinguish two types of hurdles that hamper dialogic transformation: traditional and systemic.

Traditional hurdles are widespread in the spheres that have not yet been transformed by dialogue. For example, in spite of the extended debate on the subject, household chores are still not assigned in an egalitarian way; there has not even been a general approximation toward this objective. Yet this does not mean we are going toward a less dialogic world, only that there is still a long and difficult road to achieving it.

Unlike their traditional equivalents, systemic hurdles do question the dialogic perspective, because they are generated by the very systems that have been created to facilitate dialogue. For example, the bureaucracies in political parties or in the media are not feudal remnants defending themselves against dialogic dynamics; on the contrary, these are phenomena that have grown as a part of democratic societies. Political parties that have been created to control citizens' right to vote and participation of citizens, sequester this right. For instance, through the imposition of closed electoral lists that is always more easily controlled by their bureaucracies than the voters.

This particular nature of the systemic hurdles makes it possible for the anti-modernists to brand dialogue a farce. Elections would thus be nothing but a manipulative scam in which people would believe they were choosing those who govern, but their options would actually be remote-controlled by the mass media. Teenagers, who had enjoyed a better life before the sex tourism market arrived in their towns, would be led into prostitution by an alleged ideal of freedom.

Contemporary sociology sets out to describe dialogic transformations, as well as the proposals that contribute to promoting or stopping them. One part of this task is to respond to the questioning about these dynamics. We often hear that transformations are only taking place in a small privileged sector of the world, and more than dialogue, there is conflict.
and disaccord, that behind this seeming democracy and dialogue there is actually the imposition of the powers that be, and that these impositions are legitimized through a dialogical image.

**Dialogic Modernity**

In traditional modernity, there was a recurrent debate about the freedom to dress as one sees fit, versus the oppression of being obligated to cover one's face or head. In dialogic modernity, new situations are witnessed.

An example is the female student demonstrations in Istanbul. Some were in short skirts, some with their heads covered, and they jointly claimed the right to dress as they see fit. Oppression is no longer in one or another form of dress, but in how the right to exercise this right is forcefully impeded. This is the case with the Turkish universities who expel women who decide to cover their heads.

In the informational society not only do dialogic "realities" increase, so do dialogic aims: we increasingly try to resolve disagreements between people and groups through dialogue and, if they will not let us, we demand the right to do it.

There is a long way between the dialogic objectives of progressive movements and practical realities. Yet these objectives and the effort that is made to reach them are moving them closer to reality, albeit at a slower pace than those who are fighting for them would like. This distance has been the excuse for attacking dialogic societies, by saying that they are a farce in which dialogue does not go beyond the declaration of principles, to which nobody pays attention in the moment of truth. However, it is proof of a human strength that drives these societies toward more dialogic routes.

This strength is dialogic modernity, a project that extends egalitarian dialogue to more social spheres and is shared (to greater or lesser extent) by many different groups and people.

Those who wanted the image of the Western woman to prevail among all women worldwide were acting within the framework of traditional modernity (a destructive imposition on many people and cultures). The contradictions and crises inherent in this traditional perspective reoriented modernity toward a dialogic option where the guiding values for transformation did not emerge from cultural or personal impositions, but from mutual agreement.

Dialogic modernity enables the equality of differences to come to fruition, allowing different people to live together in the same territory enjoying equal rights that will reinforce, rather than weaken, their respective identities. The demonstrations in Istanbul that were mentioned earlier were not a confrontation between Westernized women wearing miniskirts and pro-Muslim women with their heads covered. It was women who were ready to dialogue, open to different cultural options and against intransigent individuals who use arguments of force rather than the force of arguments.

The same fight for dialogue is spreading in political parties, classrooms, and homes. What we have achieved so far is far from what we still aim to achieve. But, it is precisely this tension that makes dialogue move forward. When we reach what we are proposing today, this distance will still remain, because by then we will be proposing even more egalitarian and democratic goals. This is what dialogic modernity is about.

**Dialogic Theories**

Dialogic societies generate dialogic theories. The fundamental task of sociological theories in the twenty-first century is twofold:

- On the one hand, to analyze the dialogic dynamics in our societies.
- On the other hand, to find out what factors promote or hinder such dynamics.

Just as the twentieth century witnessed a linguistic turn in the social sciences, the twenty-first century is experiencing a dialogic turn. A broad range of topics opens up for theorization and implementation:

- What are the characteristics of egalitarian dialogue?
- Which factors promote it and which ones impede it?
- What is the relationship between agreement and conflict, consensus and dissension?
- What are the indicators that differentiate between the argument of force and the force of arguments?
Sociology is a part of modernity. As Habermas says, the people and groups that rose up against the absolutist monarchs and fought for democracy created its social context. They deserve more than being labeled as unaware. Many women also paved the way by defying the obligation to marry whom their father or feudal lord decided, and decided whom they wanted to share their lives with.

From the development of modern societies and as a resource for self-government, a scientific self-knowledge emerged, which became structured in terms of different social sciences. As observed by Weber, these societies became more bureaucratized during industrialization to the point that the systemic coloniza-
tion of the life world affected sociology, which focused more on systems and structures than on people's dialogic actions. The object of study ended up contaminating the very instrument of observation, and the social sciences were excessively reduced to the analysis of structures and systems, neglecting the life worlds and people.

The informational society has brought this bureaucratization to a crisis point, which is intensifying in the twenty-first century. We are fighting to break free from our systemic kidnappers and we want to make our own decisions. Not only do we want to choose whom we want to be with, but we also demand full freedom for separation, and absolute equality between heterosexual and homosexual unions. We will not settle for democracy, we fight for universal legislation that prosecutes the current or former dictators of any nation. Dialogic actions are taking place in all social spheres tearing many of the traditional walls down. Societies are becoming dialogic and require the social sciences, which are sustained by their resources, to contribute to this dynamic that they want and are in the process of undertaking.

In order to fulfill this task, sociology must also undergo a process of decolonization from the systems and structures to which it has been increasingly linked throughout its history. Over the last decades of the twentieth century, its redefinition has been too slow. Some sad examples are illustrated by the tardiness of seriously analyzing the informational society in which it operates. Above all, in the scarcity of studies about the main contemporary contributions to our discipline: the theory of communicative action has been read directly by only a small percentage of sociological theorists.

A significant number of sociologists have focused on analyzing the unintended consequences of human actions, overlooking consequences that parallel the intentions of those who carry them out. In this way people and groups are dismissed as "cultural dopes," incapable of understanding why they do the things they do and the effects they cause. Only the experts in social science have a privileged access to the "sacred" knowledge of the true motives and consequences of human actions.

As we have already pointed out, people created dialogical actions before sociology existed. Those who have led these egalitarian transformations that we enjoy today deserve more respect than being dismissed as ignorant.

One of sociology's main contributions has been in showing how a large part of the actions that create these results are the product of many and diverse intentions that, in part, are distinct and even contrary to the effects they provoke. Yet another one of its contributions, the one on which we should work the most in the new century, is the analysis of the following question: with regard to what factors do the actions of people and groups move closer to or farther from their intentions?

The controversy between descriptive and normative sociology loses its meaning when we have a concept of description that includes the description (it is worth the conscious repetition) of the normativity of the social actors that carry out the actions. A good analysis of discrimination based on gender in education in the mid-nineteenth century must include "descriptive realities" like the impossibility of women studying in the university. It also has to include the description of "normative realities" like the groups of women who were already fighting to attain this right.

For the same reason, a good sociological study of educational discrimination against Gypsy people cannot do away with "descriptive realities," such as their exclusion from university, nor with "normative realities," such as the effort of many Gypsy and non-Gypsy people and groups to equally exercise their right to education. A good sociological analysis must clarify which of these efforts achieves the most and the least intended goals. That is how sociology makes a contribution to people and social groups in their efforts to keep improving their living conditions.
Sociology's task in the twenty-first century is not to improve society, but to provide social agents (those who transform society with their actions) with analytical elements. By following this path, sociology will reach its due social recognition and will become a priority in all agendas, which, in turn, will allow sociologists to devote themselves to a professionally rigorous and personally inspiring task. This is our job—and yours.

DEBATES

In each of the following situations, there is one person intervening in defense of each of the following perspectives: systemic sociology (like Parsons'), subjective sociology (like Schütz's), dialogic sociology (like Habermas'), and anti-sociology (like Foucault's). Through reflection and discussion, try to determine which of these positions are defended in each situation.

Setting #1

Institution A sets out to take on a study about social exclusion. To that end, they call a meeting of professionals in which a student also takes part. The meeting unfolds in the following way:

Rosa: In my opinion, we should first agree on the concept of exclusion we're going to work with. To define it, I propose we take the voices of the people involved into account. For instance, we could propose a qualitative research investigation, which would be characterized by discussing our conclusions with the people who are being researched. Finally, we would do a survey in order to determine the quantitative dimensions of exclusion. In this way we provide approaches that are useful for carrying out actions that lead to overcoming the problem.

Encarna: We're social scientists, not activists. Our task is to analyze the problem objectively, leaving utopias and voluntarism aside. We should not mix our sociological studies with people's subjective ideas regarding their situation. We should focus on a good definition of the concept and then proceed to quantify it.

Felipe: It doesn't seem very original to make another definition or to elaborate other qualitative and or quantitative studies on this theme. It is better to think about the motives for why we take the existence of exclusion for granted, without even asking ourselves where the concept comes from, who created it, and why. For starters, we know it hasn't been created by the people who are labeled excluded, but by politicians and social scientists who increase their prestige, enlarge their résumés, and income by studying this population and intervening in it.

Aroa: I agree with Rosa, but only regarding that we should take opinions into account, which should be none other than the subjects involved. They are the ones who define and transform situations, and not the systems' structures. I don't see the need in adding surveys in order to determine quantitative dimensions. Obviously, I'm against Encarna's proposal, because it denies the importance of the ideas of the people involved, but I have even more trouble understanding Felipe's, because in that case we wouldn't do anything.

Setting #2

Institution A decides to carry out the study with the orientation proposed by Rosa. An international organization wants to do something similar in different countries. It calls a meeting with researchers to assess what has been done until that point.

Mary: Study A mistakes the scientific spirit of sociologists with the humanist volunteerism of those who make the social reforms. Conclusions that stress a greater assessment of cultural and working abilities of underprivileged sectors are not the result of scientific analysis, but the paternalism of the researcher. The data and its interpretation are confusing because they don't differentiate clearly between the concepts of the researchers and the views of the individuals researched.

Lilian: I think the opposite. We can't continue to maintain the belief that we sociologists are above good and evil. We aren't neutral, either. At least, we're preoccupied by our prestige and remuneration, the continuation of our research institutions, and about obtaining and maintaining our jobs in the public administration or the university. Instead of insisting on neutrality, as if it was innate to us (or bestowed on us by our university degree), we should acknowledge the fact that objectivity is achieved through contributions and debate about the reasons that ground our interpretations.

Walter: It's funny that different studies have different and contradictory concepts of exclusion. However, they all present themselves as scientific. Instead of hiding behind the word "scientific," which seems to justify everything, why don't we recognize that we're different people who come from different backgrounds and perspectives? Isn't it that we put most of our efforts into having our view or theory imposed on others?

Peter: Whether we're equal or different is not the problem. The issue is