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The Anthropocene Turning Point: A New Historicity of Social Relations

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Abstract

The historical turning point evidenced by the Covid-19 crisis should now lead to a proper name being given to the notion of 'second modernity' which, up to the present time, has been defined only in relation to the 'first modernity'. Here, we put forward the thesis that this new definition be the anthropocene, so that following the 'sociology of modernity', a 'sociology of anthropocene' may become the new framework for analyzing the historicity of contemporary social relations.

Keywords: Second modernity, anthropocene, historicity, sociological theory

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is often presented as a historic turning point: that of a worldwide warning of a new type of crisis that humanity will now have to face, i.e., the potentially catastrophic globalized effects of environmental change and its health, economic, social, geopolitical and psychological consequences. In this article, I propose to take this historical dimension of the event seriously by inscribing it in an epistemological reflection on the notion of historicity in sociological reasoning. My thesis is as follows: the historical turning point evidenced by the Covid-19 crisis should lead to the notion of 'second modernity', which until now has been defined only in relation to the 'first modernity', being recognized as a distinct era with a distinct proper name. I would like to put forward that this new definition be the *anthropocene*, so that following the 'sociology of modernity' a 'sociology of anthropocene' may become the new framework for analyzing the historicity of contemporary social relations.

I borrow the concept of historicity from Alain Touraine (1977), who contrasted it with the notion of historicism. While most classical and Marxist sociological theories are evolutionary and place human societies within history, Touraine proposed, on the contrary, to situate history within societies, at the heart of the dynamics of social relations and social change. This is why, instead of describing modern society as a capitalist society animated by class struggle, or as a modernizing nation-state, Touraine defined modern society by the singular historicity of the social relations peculiar to the industrial society: that of a central conflict between employers and workers movements surrounding the orientation of 'progress' of modernization (Touraine 1981).

Even if Touraine's approach remained Western-centric, it seems to me that the notion of historicity is productive for an analogous description of the specific dynamics of social relations in the anthropocene era. In other words, it can be hypothesized that the central conflict that animates contemporary social relations opposes the exclusive and hierarchical forms of solidarity inherited from the first modernity with the more inclusive and egalitarian forms of solidarity constructed in the ordeal of environmental catastrophe.

2. Crisis of modernity, crisis of modern sociology

In order to propose a new historicity as the object of a sociology of anthropocene, it is necessary to review previous discussions concerning notions of modernity, crisis of modernity and critique of modernity.

Modernity is inseparably the practice and narrative of a set of ruptures and dissociations (Eisentadt 1966; Parsons 1951; Touraine 1995). It is the break with the traditional past, the end of the cosmological unity of the world (secularization), the dissociation and autonomy of the logics of action (science, economics, politics, art), the separation of culture from nature. But it is also a definition of time considered as 'progress', a definition of space considered as an 'outside' to be conquered, a definition of action and of the individual defined by autonomy.

This narrative of modernity, however, was challenged by numerous observations and criticisms. Feminist critiques of an androcentric definition of autonomy, at the price of women's subordination (Tronto 1993). Anticolonial, postcolonial and

decolonial critiques of a western-centric definition of modernization, progress, autonomy and universalism, at the price of denying, disqualifying, racializing, subordinating ‘others’ (Bhambra 2007). Environmentalist critiques of the ‘damage of progress’, with the increasing number of industrial accidents and environmental degradations at all levels of scale (Beck 1992).

This crisis of modernity led to a first theorization, that of ‘postmodernity’ (Lyotard 1977). According to this approach, as this Western-centric modernity of instrumental rationality and its great narrative become exhausted, the modern parenthesis would close and give way to a postmodern historical moment, allowing the diverse mosaic of singularities and narratives to unfold.

However, the globalized dimension of the crisis of modernity quickly led to a need to close this theoretical parenthesis of postmodernity. As Antony Giddens (1990) and Ulrich Beck (1992) point out, we cannot escape from modernity because modernity has totally shaped the contemporary world, so that it is the “consequences of modernity” that rather define the contemporary moment. However, the analysis of these consequences of modernity is itself the result of a conflict of definition.

First of all in a modern way: on the one hand, there was the pessimism inherited from Max Weber and radicalized by the Frankfurt school, diagnosing a modernity as leading to the destruction of humanity, because this modernity, reduced to instrumental rationality, had become like “a runaway engine of enormous power which threatens to rush out of control” (Giddens 1990: 139). On the other hand, there was the optimism inherited from techno-scientific positivism and the creative destruction of capitalism defending the idea of a hypermodernity capable of solving the problems of modernity by taking even more technological risks while continuing to transfer these risks to ‘others’ (Beck 1992).

Yet, it is the illusory nature of this hypermodern solution to the problems of modernity that Ulrich Beck and Antony Giddens emphasize with the concept of ‘reflexive second modernity’ (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994). Modernity was seen in itself as an ultimate and universal historical stage of human development. In retrospect, however, we must consider that this modernity built by the West between

the sixteenth and twentieth centuries was only a 'first modernity', and that the contemporary moment is that of a doubly reflexive 'second modernity'.

This second modernity involves on the one hand a mechanical reflexivity in the sense that it is defined by boomerang effects of all the actions that were done or not done during the first modernity and that potentially led to the planetary catastrophe. In this sense, while the central time of the first modernity was a future mobilizing a present that broke with the past, the central time of the second modernity is a present that is the consequence of the past and whose uncertain future is conditioned by present actions and inactions. In the same way, whereas the first modernity thought it had an exterior to conquer, to exploit, or to transfer risks to, the second modernity no longer has an exterior because the boomerang effects are now globalized in an accelerated manner (Mcneil 2014).

On the other hand, this reflexivity of the second modernity is also defined by its critical dimension; indeed, the second modernity can no longer develop the program of 'progress', 'growth' and 'development' in a positivist manner, because the risks and uncertainties concerning the future are such that it is necessary to totally redefine the relationship of humanity to its environment and to its very conditions of existence as a species.

From this standpoint, the notion of 'compressed modernity' as it has been developed, especially in Asia (Chang 1998), does not replace the notion of second modernity. It rather describes the accelerated pace of modernization in the Global South and in Asia since the imposition of the first modernity by the colonial or imperialist Western relationship. Indeed, the notion of second modernity is less a chronological moment or a situated (Western) type of modernity, than a reflexive way of thinking about the crisis of modernity and its new planetary stakes. In this sense, the specific experience of a compressed modernity is part of a second modernity common to all contemporary experiences.

3. From the sociology of modernity to the sociology of anthropocene

This, then, is why it seems to me that this second reflexive modernity can not only be defined sociologically in relation to the first modernity – which is unsurpassable – but can now be defined in itself, that is, by having its own

framework of historicity. It seems to me that the notion of ‘anthropocene’ best describes this new historicity.

In order to make a properly sociological use of this notion, the geological misinterpretation must first of all be set aside. Indeed, the contemporary moment undoubtedly has an effect on the climate of the planet, but it has no effect on the planet itself which is not threatened by disappearance or transformations of a geological scale. Rather, the focus should be on the effects of human actions and inactions on the living conditions of humans and associated species (Latour 2017). In any case, it is indeed the existence and action of humans and the ‘great acceleration’ of these effects on a planetary rather than a global scale that is at issue, so that this is indeed a historical moment in which humanity (anthropos) is the central actor (Chakrabarty 2009). Moreover, if we wish to pursue a reasoning specific to the social sciences, we should think about these actions and inactions in terms of social relations.

This is why the ‘plantationocene’ proposal put forward by postcolonial criticism is important: it insists on the early globalization, via the colonial relationship from the end of the fifteenth century onwards, of an extractivist relationship to the environment with no consideration for humans and non-humans outside Europe (Haraway 2016; Moore et al. 2019). This is why the notion of ‘capitalocene’ is also important, underlining the particularly central role of capitalism in the exploitation and destruction of humans and non-humans (Moore 2016). But these two notions are only partial: the colonial relationship was built before capitalism (the latter can even be considered as having been made possible by the colonial relationship) and extractivist exploitation was achieved as much by capitalism as by socialist models of modernization. This is why the more general notion of anthropocene is preferable in that it includes, since the first modernity, the colonial plantation economy and the capitalist and socialist extractivism, as well as the consequences and feedback effects of these developments that characterize the second modernity.

However, this new historicity has yet to be defined in such a way as to provide the framework for a ‘sociology of anthropocene’, just as classical sociology had defined itself as a ‘sociology of modernity’. From this perspective, there is no need to invent a new social science, but rather to extend the capacity of

sociology to describe, understand and explain much broader and more entangled relationships than the thinking of classical sociology of modernity. It is this idea of an ‘augmented sociology’ (Macé 2020) that I will now describe, starting from the classical sociological notions of *interdependence* and *solidarity*. These two notions are the basis of social science reasoning: since it is human nature to be relational beings, it can be argued that there is no reality for humans other than that constructed, instituted and transformed by the totality of relationships between beings – in other words, by social relations.

What the anthropocene concept emphasizes is that these interdependencies are not reduced to relationships between humans by defining a ‘social’ separate from ‘nature’ and limited by national boundaries, but that these *de facto* interdependencies are global in scale and include nonhumans, so that an augmented sociological reasoning must be extended to take account of these broader interdependencies (Latour 2005). It is in this sense that Bruno Latour (1993) reminds us that, despite the narratives of modernity, “we have never been modern”, in that these interdependencies have always existed, even when modernity intended to free itself from them in the name of modernizing autonomy, and that it is now the feedback from and awareness of these broader interdependencies that feed contemporary reflexivity.

This is what Joan Tronto (1993) points out when she discusses the typically modern notion of autonomy: while this notion was at the heart of modern capacity for action through scientific and technical, political, artistic, and economic conquests, it was illusory as it obscured its necessary condition: the non-autonomy and subordination of all those who, through their invisible or disqualified work (women, the colonized, the working poor, non-humans), enabled the autonomy of some. Thus, taking into account interdependencies in the anthropocene framework means no longer placing the notion of autonomy at the center of reasoning but that of care and vulnerability – not only that of the weakest but that of each person throughout his or her life and of everyone on a global scale.

This is why the notion of anthropocene also makes it possible to update the notion of solidarity, which should be understood in the broad sense as the ways in which humans construct and institute the social organization of their interdependencies.

More precisely, this notion of solidarity must nowadays be understood as a central issue of contemporary historicity, whether solidarities respond to vulnerabilities through inclusive policies of care or through exclusive policies of autonomy inherited from the first modernity.

This tension between care and autonomy primarily concerns sociological theory because, by opposing traditional and modern forms of solidarity, classical sociologists have included this notion in a doubly reductive evolutionary reasoning, typical of what Beck (2007) refers to as ‘methodological nationalism’.

Firstly, by legitimizing the colonial and racial narrative of modernity, where the demonstration of difference from others led to the establishment of a hierarchy. This gave rise to colonial and postcolonial narratives based on notions of ‘modernization’ and ‘level of development’ and contributed to the globalization of a mode of growth that destroyed living conditions (Bhambra 2007). By hiding this double colonial and extractivist dimension of empires, this reasoning was also reductive in that it reduced the notion of solidarity to that of society, understood as a social system instituted within the framework of modern (i.e., Western) nation-states. Classical modern sociology has thus arbitrarily dissociated the academic field into the ‘science of society’ for domestic use and ‘international relations’, thus making it very difficult for sociology to think about the globalization of social relations (Mann 1987).

Secondly, this focus on the notion of society was linked to an overly integrated and inclusive conception of society as a social system based on institutions of control and reproduction. This focus on control and domination to define forms of solidarity is, moreover, strange for a discipline born out of an original concern about the meanings of the revolutionary upheavals of early modernity (Abbott 2016). And this seems all the more irrelevant today, as the era is once again one of anxiety over changes of an unprecedented magnitude.

It is true, however, that social actors do not stop talking about society, either to express their desire to make society or, conversely, to denounce society as domination. This is why it seems to me that from now on, sociology must be able to return the notion of society to the actors and think rather about the forms of social organization in terms of *configuration*. That is, in the sense of Norbert Elias

(1978), without prejudging the coherence or even the justice of these forms of organization of solidarity, to be able to describe, in the ‘glocalized’ tangle of levels of scale and relations between humans and non-humans, the logics of action, rationalities, representations and power relations that tend towards more or less inclusive or exclusive, more or less egalitarian or hierarchical forms of solidarity.

4. Conclusion

It is here, it seems to me, that the notion of historicity specific to the anthropocene is situated, that is, the conflicting definition of the real and the logics of action that flow from it. What this historical turning point shows us is that the object of sociology is not society or modernity – unless we resign ourselves to a western-centric and provincial definition of sociology (Go 2016). The object of sociology is more fundamentally the construction, institution and transformation of reality through social relationships. This reality was the reality of the first modernity, and the historicity of social relations specific to the modernization of industrial societies, colonial empires and the globalization of capitalism has built both the autonomy of some and the vulnerability of all. In contemporary anthropocene historicity, sociology must be able to describe the dynamics of the actors and social relations that construct a reality which, exposed to the potential chaos of boomerang effects, balances between the exclusive action logics of (hyper)modernization and the inclusive action logics of care. From this point of view, our relationship to the Covid-19 virus can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, in a ‘first modernity’ style, as a war that would have to be fought against an outside enemy. On the other hand, in an anthropocene way, as a sign of a paradox: this virus, which is the product of the negative anthropization of the world, reveals that it is humanity itself that behaves like a virus towards its environment, at the risk of destroying that environment and disappearing with it.

To conclude, the classical issues of sociology – identifications, norms, inequalities, power, rationalities, conflicts, social relations – do not disappear: they are part of a new historicity that is no longer that of the modern, west-centric, national and industrial framework of modernity but that of the anthropocene and its risk of disasters.

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