Nikos Panayotopoulos and Franz Schultheis:

The weight of a social world in crisis:
The case of Greece in the Mediterranean context

Pierre Bourdieu: «Images d’Algérie» | Table Ronde & Exposition des photographies à Athènes 27 avril 2017

In June 2012, the Department of Sociology at the University of St. Gallen co-organized with the University of Crete (Prof. Nikos Panayotopoulos) an international workshop on the topic of "Systems of Education and Employment in the Mediterranean: Crisis of Reproduction – Crisis of the State" on the island of Tinos. The current crisis in Greece gave to the meeting special relevance: during a short stopover in Athens on our way to Tinos, our team was able to conduct a series of interviews previously arranged by our Greek colleagues focusing on the everyday experiences of the Greek population. The empirical material of the focus group discussions and in-depth-interviews with unemployed graduates, employees of state administration, teachers etc. became a frequent point of reference for the workshop in Tinos, attended by colleagues from a dozen Mediterranean countries.

These sociological investigations in the wake of a deep economic, social and cultural crisis seem to such an extent necessary and urgent that we would like to continue and deepen the pilot research started in Athens. To achieve this task, we need a start-up funding for our network of Swiss and Greek researchers that allows us to conduct a second series of interviews (ca. 50 in total, with issues such as the everyday experiences of people, their survival strategies, forms of familial solidarity) and to gather statistical data necessary for their macro sociological contextualization in order to develop a science project that can be submitted to the relevant funding bodies in this area of research, such as the European Science Foundation or the FNRS.

If sociology is understood essentially as a “crisis science”, this is not only due to the fact that one gladly falls back on it in times of crisis as a repair workshop in order to cushion the social impact of dysfunctions of the economic system or of mistaken political decisions and their consequences.

It is rather the case that central sociological concepts such as “habitus”, i.e. “the ensemble of social structures internalized or incorporated by the individual” are never as empirically clear and comprehensible as in times of crisis. Discontinuities and contradictions arise between the durable dispositions of “habitualized practices” which reflect social normality and have proved their worth before the occurrence of the crisis and the often abrupt emergence of new relationships and their requirements.

The consequent discrepancy between routinized mental, moral and behavioural dispositions and the unfamiliar new conditions is accompanied by a loss of orientation in time and space and also in regard to personal identity and role, and is frequently a source of manifold suffering.

Such a crisis penetrating the entire social context, or as one used to say” the social body”, can accordingly be truly called a “collective disorientation”, to borrow a term from the anamnesis of psychic pathologies. It can also be traced back to the distinctly sociological
concept of “anomie” which, since Durkheim’s path breaking study of suicide, is understood as the loss of reliable normative coordinates for orientation in the social world.

Since Durkheim we know that rapid social change, for example in the form of a radical economic upheaval in both a downward and an upward direction, regardless of whether prosperity and welfare suddenly decline or increase, is accompanied by such disorienting consequences for the individuals concerned, and the related pathological symptoms of suffering from loss of orientation take on in extreme cases the form of “anomic suicide”. But, according to Durkheim, they can also occur in the shape of a radical decline in the birth rate, as could be observed in exemplary fashion among the inhabitants of the former GDR after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In view of a profound and multiform crisis of society on a global scale, sociology is at present more and more called upon to fulfil its role as a crisis science and to make the central hot spots of the crisis, whether they are located at home or abroad, the terrain of sociological research and diagnosis. After all, the handwork of sociology in the sense of a “public sociology” consists not in waiting in the ivory tower until the burning issues of the time come to it or land on its desk for solution, but in undertaking a socioanalysis of social upheavals and their after-effects in confrontation with objective empirical circumstances, and also specifically with their subjective representations and interpretations by the individuals involved and acting within them.

While the processes of the so-called globalization, for example in the field of financial capital, are progressing at a furious speed and are reflected not least in the symptoms of crisis thematised above, social scientific research on these crises continues to be largely restricted to the national contexts and their sociologies in each case, even though the illusion is indulged in at big international conferences or in scientific collections of essays that a simple stringing together of contributions to a social issue from various national contexts opens up the path for cross-border scientific perspectives and “transnational” diagnoses.

In order to arrive at the long overdue international opening up of social scientific research and socio-critical analysis the sociologist himself must first approach the relevant scenes of the events no matter how difficult the empirical work may turn out to be in view of his “foreignness” and not least of the often not inconsiderable problems of communication. This might at first appear to be an unnecessary handicap and tempt one to follow the good advice to “stick to one’s trade” and be concerned with the home-made social issues of one’s own country instead of wishing to play the uninvited prophet in foreign lands. But a weighty heuristic opportunity lies concealed behind the factor of “foreignness”: it is accompanied by “distance” to the apparently self-evident givens of the everyday life-world of another society. As a result of the lack of personal involvement in the social relationships to be dealt with, being foreign provides the opportunity for a participant but nonetheless critically distanced objective approach. It offers a chance for a consciously displayed “naïve curiosity” in the face of an unknown and even seemingly “alienating” reality.

One might be tempted to consider this kind of socio-analytical ethnography or ethnographic socioanalysis and the epistemic stance necessary for it in the attempt to re-enact interpretatively “foreign” subjective experiences and interpretations as a special methodological path clearly distinct from traditional sociological procedures. But this would be a fallacy and would underestimate the manifold analogies involved in the problem of understanding what is foreign beyond class borders, distances between generations, gender differences or sub-cultural particularities in the relationship between the researcher and the researched.