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The Crise of Reproduction in the Mediterranean.

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During the last years, it has become an evidence that nations like Greece, Portugal or Spain, but also Italy and France, are not only deeply destabilized by the financial crisis and its consequences, but still more deeply and preoccupying by an extremely important rate of unemployment in general, and jobless young people particularly. The countries of the northern Mediterranean share this dramatic social question with their southern neighbours like Tunisia, Algeria or Egypt, where we find actually a level of economically and socially excluded young people, especially those having a high level of school and university diploma, of more than 50%. Concerning the Mediterranean region as a whole, it seems appropriate to speak of a profound crisis of social reproduction with radical longterm economic and political consequences not only for this region in itself, but more and more also for the rest of the world. The recent events called „Arabian spring“ have been a rather clear demonstration of the explosive political effects of what we can call a „sacrificed generation“ and it seems more than urgent to take into account seriously this dramatic crisis of large geopolitical scale, to try to reach a scientifically grounded understanding of its sociohistorical origins and determining causes.

Socioanalysis beyond borders: fieldwork in European sociology.

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 pathbreaking 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 thematized 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.

The interpretative method of sociology always brings with it the danger of ethnocentric perspectivity and the accompanying misunderstandings and

misinterpretations, but we are then dealing precisely with specific variants such as class or gender ethnocentrism.

But what are the epistemological interests of social science in dealing with subjective witnesses to the experience and handling of crises in a foreign country? How far does such an analysis remain rooted in the genre of the ethnography of a singular case? How far can it claim to make an exemplary contribution to the sociology of social crises and the diagnosis of social suffering? Here one can call to mind classical predecessors and models such as Friedrich Engels:

“In the meantime, however, the established fact of wretched conditions in *England* will impel us to establish also the fact of wretched conditions in *Germany*”, Engels wrote in the year 1845 in his preface to “The Condition of the Working Class in England”, a work in which he “wanted more than a mere *abstract* knowledge of my subject; I wanted to see you in your homes, to observe you in your every-day life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances”

Emphasizing that in his depiction of the everyday life of the English workers he observed and wished to observe them not as “members of a single isolated nation” but as men, as “human beings in the most emphatical meaning of the word”, Engels presented a relentlessly candid analysis and critique of society in early industrial England.¹ Although it had the status of a well-informed and well-documented “country study” it aimed essentially at an empirical analysis and theoretical penetration of the “social question” of the industrial age and the corresponding forms of human suffering in the social world which went beyond the constraints of the national framework and the ethnographic character of the subject under study. In view of the general intention and relevance of Engels’ study, which consciously took a concrete exemplary case as its starting point and then passed beyond it, scarcely any reader in this country would make the mistake of considering it primarily with the curious but distanced and uninvolved gaze of the “tourist” as an English “special case”. No matter how much the meticulously collected detailed knowledge of English institutions

¹ Marx, Karl u. Engels, Friedrich: Werke, Bd. 2, Berlin 1976, S. 225-507, hier S. 231. English translation: The Condition of the Working Class in England with an introduction by Eric Hobsbawm, Panther Books, St. Albans 1969, at pp 19, 323-324.

(from factory laws to the school system) and the everyday world (from family life to the popular culture of the public houses) may often “disconcert” the German reader, the sensitively depicted conditions of human life and human fates, the social contradictions and constraints disclosed in the work are nonetheless empathetically comprehensible to him “just as they are”, and beyond all superficial exoticism they have the character of intercultural variations on a familiar shared basic theme.

In regard to the social question in Europe today it can be said that the state of crisis experienced in Greece and mediated through this experience is not expressed in a fundamentally different way in many neighbouring countries and that instead of being treated as a special case it ought to be taken as a kind of model case. From such a sociological point of view Greece presents a huge sociological laboratory in which all conceivable contradictions and states of tension, all the dislocations and breaks in our contemporary late capitalist society are concentrated through a burning glass, and a sociological analysis of the conditions there can provide the foundation for a more comprehensive transnational diagnosis of society and our times. This sociological laboratory includes above and first of all the members of society affected by the crisis and their subjective mental states, their changing relationships to themselves and their life projects in the time of crisis, their coping strategies and their resistance. It also includes the emerging symptoms of social and subjective disorientation and the accompanying forms of hurt and suffering. These can certainly be understood empathetically by contemporaries in the materially privileged north of Europe and can thus contribute to the prevention of shallow moralization and sweeping assignments of guilt.

The research-ethical demand formulated by Bourdieu et al., following Spinoza, in the pathbreaking study “The Weight of the World” (*La Misère du Monde*): “Do not deplore, do not laugh, do not hate, understand” (Polity Press 1999, p. 19), acquires even greater validity when using interpretive interviews in a foreign social context, as in the encounter between two cultural contexts or national affiliations structures of symbolic rule or hierarchical international relationships consciously or unconsciously assert themselves.