Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 2 (51) - 2009
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

COHESIVE AMBIGUITY AS A MODERN RESPONSE TO SOCIAL DIVERGENCE

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Abstract: *The paper proposes that "modernity", as it has emerged in contemporary social and cultural theory, needs to get past coherence-based models. It needs to be conceptualized as a dynamically stable vortex of ambiguous meanings, generated by social fragmentation.*

Key words: *modernity, ambiguity, social experience, pluralism, incertitude.*

To define modernisation was actually an action essential and constitutive to the very process it pretended to reflect upon. There is no undisputed consensus among scholars with respect to what *modernity* means, one of the main reasons being that the concept allows quasi-antagonistic understandings. It has been argued, for instance, that the focus on political change, on parliamentarian democracy, on the rule of law and the human rights, on the rationalization of the institutions, markers that have traditionally delineated the semantic perimeter of the notion, can be drastically relativized if we shift to the expressive perspective on the social life, where the dominant features are an urge toward authenticity, intensity of experience, emotional cohesion or militant symbolic thinking (Calinescu 1987). But it is also a fact that the political rationalization of modernity not always kept pace with the rationalization of the social production of knowledge, that is to say with the practice and the worldview of the natural sciences. Therefore, the logic of scientific research has been hailed by successive generations of positivists as the better self of of the judicial and political reasoning that has traditionally articulated the Western societal order (Popper, 1957). Other unavoidable controversies are the ones that roam between a rational choice description of social change, that poses the adaptive capacity of human analytic intelligence as the basic incentive of development and growth processes (Olson 1982), the constructivistic approach that sees normative conformity as the force behind succesive waves of de- and re-traditionalization of the society (Heelas, Lash & Morris), and culturalist analyses that postulate the primordial, irreplaceable part that the voluntaristic change of foundational beliefs plays in the processes of social transformation (Harrison & Huntington, 2000).

Considering the possibility of overcoming these contradictions, we propose that meaning ambiguity and prevalence of loose social structures that rely on individual agents and at the same time construct the identity of these agents are some of the most distinctive characteristics of modernity as an intellectual and existential experience.

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Scholars of rather different theoretical persuasions tend to consider pluralization and ambiguity of meaning as a side, rather than main, effect of modernity. In other words, they see modern ambiguity as a weaker and opposed force to the one that really moves ahead modernity, namely its irrepressible drive towards all-encompassing control or explanation (Adorno & Horkheimer 1987, Foucault 1972). Ambiguity is, in their understanding, the unintended aura of the will to rational totality. There are, however, thinkers that reverse this causality and suggest that modernity is *par excellence* a form of order-generating ambiguity (Bauman: 1991, Giddens: 1991).

Irrespective of these different approaches, there is an emerging consensus around describing modernity as an individualistic, divergent, and fragmented social order, in which meanings are not given but continuously disputed, inducing continuous changes in vocabularies (Rorty, 1989), and generating a proliferation of interpretive communities (Fish, 1980). Modern social order is described as a cluster of opposite tendencies and impulses (Dobrescu, 2001; Matei, 2004). It involves a growing number of individuals and social groups found in inner and inter- (but also intra-) subjective debates over their basic values, the meaning of their lives, their institutions, and their symbolic identity. Thus, the distinguishing character of modernization might not be epistemological and moral consistency, as it was constantly upheld by confident essentialists (Gellner: 1992, Polanyi: 1944, Wallerstein: 1974), but a process of fission of traditional authority and social order. It generates social fragmentation at the level of traditional social institutions (ethnic or racial groups, gender-defined social roles, parties, classes, families, etc.) and it creates chronic moral doubt (Bauman 1993, Taylor 1989).

Modernity can most parsimoniously be described as a vortex created by chronic conflict between plural self-legitimating discourses. Modern individuals believe in the ability and natural right to decide for themselves in all matters of principle, be they religious, economic, political, or artistic. Individuals consciously assume a personal ideological perspective on the world and try to act on it (Wuthnow 1976).

If we accept that the core of modernity is one of conflict and individual autonomy, the question that arises immediately is: what prevents modernity from collapsing into itself due to its inner conflicts? The answer, as suggested by Durkheim, Weber or Simmel, is that contradictions are dampened by a final, if grudging acceptance of the idea that the fundamental units of agency, individuals animated by particular values and ideas, should accept pluralism of values and opinions and the tensions they entail as the basic given of life. Rational self-understanding and individuation end up completely fused with a consciousness of ambiguity as indeterminacy. Modern individuals live in an intellectual environment that, although hard to predict, they nevertheless perceive in positive and prospective terms. Uncertainty is seen less as a weakness and as a threat, and more as a source of opportunity (Beck 1991). Self-consistency and self-doubt coexist by keeping each other in check. As one becomes more radicalized, the other becomes equally intense. At least in theory, doubt and certainty cancel each other, keeping the modern world in balance.

In modern societies, divergent and even opposing sets of knowledge, cultural preferences, and personal identification (defined by ideology, race, gender, ethnicity, class, etc.) are the ultimate reality. Preserving their coexistence is the

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great enterprise of communities and governments. Yet, pluralism by itself cannot prevent the contending forces found at the heart of the modern vortex to catch up with each other and to consume their reciprocal rejection in a final conflagration. Pluralism needs a stabilizing force. Similar to a nuclear reactor, which needs neutral graphite bars to prevent the reaction between the rods of fissionable uranium from triggering a core meltdown, modern society needs to intersperse between plural, divergent at times, viewpoints, social forces, and spiritual yearnings a set of deflector shields. These are a series of social compacts.

The first is that social divergence is acceptable and even desirable (Dahrendorf 1988, Habermas 1973). The second is that a halo of conceptual and value ambiguity should envelope the central concepts of social discourse. The first social covenant accepts that the social moorings of who we are cannot be organized only along one axis. As Daniel Bell emphasizes, the basic contradiction (and characteristic) of modernity is that its economic, social and cultural axes tend to diverge (Bell 1977). Social prestige and power are justified in several ways, not always congruent with each other: economic, cultural, lifestyle-based, sexual orientation, etc. In other words, society tends to be fragmented into many sets of only partially overlapping groups, each defined by lifestyle, sexual orientation, wealth, subcultures, ethnicity, race, etc. and none of which could be construed as "naturally superior".

This structural divergence translates into a corresponding state of chronic meaning pluralism. All major issues (religion, politics, art) are disputed by the multiple groups that form modern societies. A plurality of only partially overlapping vocabularies is used to explain core concepts. For each major societal concept there will be a plurality of definitions. The Christian God is paternalistic, controlling, vengeful, and inflexible for some, or maternal, embracing, loving, and accepting for others. It is a male for fundamentalists, ambi or nongendered for some reform Christians, and feminine for radicals. The democratic ideal means for the Jeffersonian activist a return to the ideal of direct participation, for the conservative adept of Leo Strauss a return to a philosophic aristocracy of virtue, while for the socialist activist democracy means ensuring that there is fairness in the way in which life chances, or outcomes, are distributed in society. The modern artistic ideal is disputed between those who believe in inner meanings and conceptual discovery of beauty and those (few) who still cling onto the classical cannon of idealized representation.

To summarize, we propose that modernity is caught in a "vorticist" social order that: a) is characterized by social divergence and inter-group conflict; because b) it relies on an individualistic ideal that enhances the process of social fragmentation, which c) produces ambiguity in the realm of social knowledge and meanings. As a corollary, a tentative definition of modernity can be proposed. *Modernity is a type of social order that paradoxically leverages divergence through ambiguity for keeping itself in a state of shifting equilibrium.*

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