

A Taylorian Perspective on Social Change: Social Meanings and Cultural Identities

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Abstract. Mainstream social science has not been able to go beyond an individualistically framed study of socio-cultural phenomena and its processes of transformation. In this prevailing view, values and beliefs, meanings and identities, are always thought of as individual occurrences, and macro explanations are only reached by aggregation. In this paper, I want to argue for a new conceptualization of social change that explicitly takes into account irreducibly ‘social’ meanings, those which are not decomposable into individual properties. The concept of a ‘social imaginary’ set out recently by the Canadian social philosopher Charles Taylor illustrates the way to approach the study of change in this holistic fashion, thus providing a concrete alternative to atomistic accounts of change. I end up with a brief discussion on the dynamics of social change in general.

Keywords: inter-subjective meanings, cultural identities, social change, social imaginary, Charles Taylor

1. Social science today: Interpretive *and* atomistic

Since the beginning of the twentieth century we have notice of the existence of interpretive or ‘hermeneutical’ approaches in the sciences of man. Max Weber represents in sociology such an approach with his *Verstehende Soziologie* as well as Schütz’s phenomenological sociology and the various theories that have descended from this tradition; Freud’s psychoanalysis, Erikson’s psycho-history, Rogers’ personality theory, among others, may count as hermeneutical forerunners in psychology; this approach is also present in political theory and in general in all disciplines which study human behavior. According to Charles Taylor, hermeneutical approaches are based on the idea that human action is defined by judgments and evaluations which cannot be reduced to statements about ‘brute data’, “a unit of information which is not the deliverance of a judgment, which has by definition no element in it of reading or interpretation” (Taylor, 1985[1971]: 19).

Arguably, interpretive approaches historically crystallized in opposition to that epistemology which emerged with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and which informs many experimental strands of social research until today. As Taylor argues (1985[1973]), this classical model of science consists in two basic principles: firstly, as already indicated, the idea that any scientific enterprise should be grounded in brute or plain data, i.e., in information that is intersubjectively univocal and that therefore gives anyone the possibility to check some research result just by replicating a given experiment. But secondly and in addition to that, neutral procedures are needed in order to process the neutral input in an interpretation-free way. These ‘univocal operations’ are recognizable today in the form of operational definitions, used in scientific research in general to define something in terms of the operations that count as measuring it – avoiding in this way defining the thing in terms of some intrinsic essence, on the one hand, and allowing going beyond disputes of judgment, on the other hand. However, if human action is constitutively shaped by

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the “thoughts, images, intentions, and ways of seeing of the people concerned” then these ‘self-understandings’ people have should be included in the definition or explanation of the phenomenon studied by the social scientist. (Ibid: 120). It is in this sense that Taylor speaks of man as a ‘self-interpreting animal’ and of social science as essentially a hermeneutical enterprise.

Especially during the past fifty years, interpretation has become one of the most important intellectual paradigms of humanities and social sciences scholarship. But despite this emphasis given to interpretation and meaning, the way social research is carried out today exhibits the adherence to an unhealthy individualistic credo: that of atomism and its correspondent reliance on methodological individualism. For the purposes of this paper, more important than a theoretical refutation of this view (section 2) will be to argue for an alternative holistic model of hermeneutical social science, which can make sense of collective phenomena in the form of cultural identities or inter-subjective meanings (sections 3 and 4), for this is precisely what atomistic approaches cannot do.

2. An objection against atomism

The main line in which social research is carried out today is, as we saw, both hermeneutic *and* atomistic. To the extent that it views an interpretive element in every investigation of human agency, it distinguishes itself from extreme forms of empiricism, i.e. Behaviorism (which squares perfectly with the principles of the classical epistemology). The problem with this mainstream of social inquiry is that while accounting for beliefs and values, considers them as a mere subjective events taking place in the minds of individuals. What considerations lead into this atomistic view? And, what is wrong with it (if anything)?

Popper in his philosophical considerations, Weber in sociology, Schumpeter and Hayek in economic and political theory have all advocated for an atomistic or individualistic approach for identifying the factors that should count as ultimate in the order of explanation of social phenomena. They are important figures of what’s known since Schumpeter as methodological individualism in the social sciences. This influential methodological principle draws, as Taylor would argue, on the atomism that came with the development of modern natural science and which was introduced by Hobbes into the sciences of man. (Taylor, 1995[1990]). The whole must be understood in terms of the parts that compose it, and since societies are made up of individuals, social structures and conditions should be accounted for in terms of the properties of these individuals. At first look the idea of atomism appears as a most natural and obvious stand point, for isn’t the individual human being the only one who can be said to think and act? It is precisely from the interaction of individuals –so goes the argument— that society emerges with its practices, norms, traditions, etc. Under this impression, one is tempted to discard any kind of holistic approach that seeks in a supra-individual level the key terms for an explanation of society.

The crucial argument against atomism passes through an examination of the peculiar nature of what Taylor calls ‘meaning events’. The core of the argument is already found in Wittgenstein. The point of departure is the consideration that social practices, norms, traditions and the like require human beings capable of thought— something which the methodological individualist would instantly agree to. But what is the nature of these thoughts? In examining language, Wittgenstein was able to show that any linguistic item (a word or concept, a sentence or judgment) has a meaning only in virtue of an already existing language, with which this particular item is internally connected and against which a simple word acquires a definite signification. Any instance of rule-governed human behavior, such as a game, moves in a domain of validity where ‘the part’ (an action) is determined by the place that it occupies within ‘the whole’ (a language, a set of rules). Taylor applies this insight to (meaningful) human behavior in general. “Thoughts exist as it were in the dimension of meaning and require a background of available meanings in order to be the thoughts that they are.” (Taylor, 1995[1990]: 131). The example Taylor gives is the hypothetical case where a Neolithic man praises his lover of being ‘sophisticated’ in the way she behaves. But if it’s true what we know now of the Neolithic farmers in upper Syria, such a romantic scene could have never taken place. The available culture and language in those ancient times did not possess anything resembling the idea of ‘sophistication’ and therefore such a talk makes no sense within this particular cultural community. ‘Meaning events’ are according to Taylor those which can only be intelligible against a meaning background, a language. And this is what ultimately rules out methodological individualism.

As meaning events, human thoughts and actions are necessarily embedded in a society, which should be seen in turn as the locus of a given linguistic and cultural community. There can be no individual action without the context of a society so understood. And since methodological individualism ignores the latter (in its attempt to decompose macro structures into individual acts) it cannot deliver a satisfactory explanation of social life; it will always provide a partial or reductionist picture of it.

3. Moving beyond atomism: inter-subjective meanings

The previous considerations lead to the idea that society is an undecomposable unit of meaning. Now, what does it mean for a social scientist to approach society as a whole, i.e. in a holistic fashion?

An atomist political scientist might be studying, for example, the observed correlation between certain (ideological) beliefs and certain voting practices within a given society or subgroup of it. In other words, he is interested in the relation between some *subjective* meanings and some objective institutional practice, the latter being measured in more or less neutral way (more or less explicitly following the principle of brute data identification –depending on the intellectual conviction of the researcher in question). We are confronting here a set of ontological and methodological assumptions that tell us that beliefs, attitudes, and values will always be those of a particular individual or subject. What is forever out of consideration in this view is what Taylor calls inter-subjective meanings, something like objective meanings. (Taylor, 1985[1971]).

But if the arguments developed in this paper are right, then what an atomist calls ‘subjective meanings’ are not real meaning events in the sense defined above, precisely because they are defined in isolation from the socio-cultural context in which they arise. As soon as we see the impossibility of this, we are drawn to search for the correspondent background of meanings as the only way to understand the action/practice under study. We seek to identify the historically and geographically bounded sets of inter-subjective meanings –a particular culture— within which particular actions acquire a value that otherwise would not have. Inter-subjective meanings are not only available in the form of the constitution of a state or other legal documents, but are operative in all its different institutions and practices; they are, so to speak, embodied in the structure of a society. And it is only from the basis of an abstract or disembodied conception of meaning that atomism can appear as a convincing theory. Concrete or embodied meaning has, on the contrary, always a social and objective dimension. “The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action.” (Ibid: 36). Inter-subjective meanings in this sense are not the same thing as consensus, for the simple reason that the latter presupposes the former. In order to agree or disagree on something, both parties need first to understand what they are discussing about, what is the issue at stake: they first need to share a web of inter-subjective understandings, norms, values, and the like.

But now the limits of mainstream social sciences should be visible. Because of the prevalence of an atomist methodological dictum known as methodological individualism, social scientists in the great majority of the cases cannot offer any satisfactory account of inter-subjective meanings. Cultural identities so understood and their processes of transformation over time stay forever out of reach. In the following, some conceptual guidelines are provided on how a more adequate theory of social change should look like in light of what has been said until here.

4. Towards a holistic conception of social change

The following proposal for a holistic view of social and cultural change is not based on the conviction that empirical and atomistic social sciences, as we know them today, are globally wrong. The problem only begins when this approach is claimed to explain the whole of society. But there are certain aspects of it – individual and collective identities, cultural and social transformation processes—that are almost impossible to be made sense of from the individualistic perspective. Thus the need for an alternative theoretical and methodological approach which aims at contributing to the field with a more phenomenological description of what we identified in the previous section as inter-subjective meanings.

It is today widely acknowledged within the various social science disciplines that no social reality can be properly studied in abstraction from its constitutive self-interpretations. This is the conviction behind what has come to be known as ‘interpretive social science’, a general mental pattern for guiding research, which has been endorsed by such influential and diverse authors as Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, and Michael Walzer, among others. According to this perspective, changes taking place in social practices, institutions or identities always imply a transformation in their constitutive self-interpretations, even in those cases where these transformations are triggered by external (non-interpretive) factors such as ecological catastrophes, wars or the introduction of a new technology in a given society. These kinds of external factors can certainly bring about deep structural changes but its effects will be mediated in every case by modifications of the self-interpretations operating in those social structures. But how can we engage in a concrete study of these changing self-interpretations without falling into a reductionist interpretation of them?

A useful concept to approach holistically the phenomenon of change is that of ‘social imaginary’, recently used by Taylor to characterize “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations... the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor, 2004: 23). Taylor’s main thesis is that our modern Western world is the result of a series of transformations of the social imaginary of pre-modern Europe and North America. Social change is thus inextricably linked to a mutation of the social imaginary. Of course this takes time. It’s a long process where new practices (or modifications of old ones) slowly or disruptively develop among certain groups of the population, but it also can mean that these developments in turn lead to the constitution of new social imaginaries. The three forms of social self-understanding that characterize modernity (as a consequence of the transformations of the social imaginary) are, according to Taylor, the economy, the public sphere, and the practices of democratic self-rule. We find here a nice framework for the identification and description of inter-subjective meanings in order to understand the rise and fall of collective identities.

Now what changes motivated the rise of the modern social imaginary? Although the analysis undertaken by Taylor does not focus on a causal explanation of it, he does make clear that his project can neither be classified as idealist nor as materialist – we are faced rather with a multi-level theory of change. Thus, in accounting for the rise of the economy as a crucial feature of our modern world, Taylor points to at least three underlying types of historical changes: economic ones (the increasing number of business classes, merchants, and later manufacturers in Holland and England); political (the new social order requiring ordered and disciplined economic life for the masses in some parts of Europe and in North-America); and purely spiritual changes (the rejection of the Catholic idea of higher vocations that led to the Calvinist sanctification of ordinary life – of production and reproduction). But despite Taylor’s acknowledgement of multiple factors operating behind the rise of modernity, he is not explicit in accounting for the dynamics of social change in general.

In this respect, an important complement to Taylor’s reflections may be found in Hartmut Rosa’s formal theory of social change. (Rosa, 2004). Building on Taylor and other authors, he sees change as occurring between four mutually interdependent levels of self-interpretation. Michael Walzer (1993, 2004) had already identified three possible locations of the significant interpretations of a society, namely, (1) explicit self-interpretations in the form of law documents, literature, and theories, (2) institutions and social practices, and (3) the thoughts and beliefs people have. To these three, Rosa adds a fourth locus, namely, (4) the body-practices, habits, and feelings of individuals. There is here a relation of interdependence and well as of partial autonomy between these four levels of meaning, where (1) and (3) refer to ‘explicit’ or reflective forms of self-interpretations, and (2) and (4) go for ‘implicit’ or embodied meanings. The main insight behind this theory is that “institutions and theories, or implicit and explicit self-understandings, can easily get into conflict and mutual tensions that put pressure for change on one or both of them.” (Rosa, 2004: 695). In other words, this formalist theory explains the dynamics of social change using a criterion of consistency. It avoids the mistake of advocating for a substantive mono-causal explanation, as we find in classical theories of social change, and focuses only in the possible tensions or discrepancies that arise between any of the different spheres. Of course, the same relationship holds for the individual level, (3) and (4), but one should

not forget –as we showed in the previous sections— that individual self-interpretations are always embedded in a social context, or as Taylor puts it elsewhere “in a web of interlocution”. (Taylor, 1992: 36).

Social inquiry exhibits today a markedly individualistic bent. What we are proposing here is an alternative methodological approach to complement the results of mainstream social sciences by offering qualitative descriptions of socio-cultural realities and their processes of transformation. This alternative conceptualization of change seems to be particularly necessary nowadays in view of what Raymond Boudon called two decades ago the failure of the main line of social change theories, which were based on the postulate that it was possible to make “interesting, verifiable and nomothetic statements about social change”. (Boudon 1986: 9). And although we share Boudon diagnosis, the way out of the problem seems to be elsewhere, in the direction we showed in this paper. Besides Taylor’s work on social imaginaries, Craig Calhoun’s study of nationalism is an excellent and recent example of what we mean by ‘holistic’ interpretive inquiry. They signal the way towards a very necessary new type of social investigation, rare to find in our days.

5. References

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