

SOCIAL AGENCY

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

OF THE 21st CENTURY HUMANIST SOCIOLOGY

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Wrocław, 20-22 October 2010

Organisers:

- Institute of Sociology, University of Wrocław
- Polish Sociological Association
- Co-financed from the EEA financial mechanism, the "Homing" Programme of the Foundation for Polish Science

The conference goal is to stimulate a sociological debate on the problems of social agency. It will be organised around three thematic sessions. We invite the submission of theoretical and empirical papers which will (1) discuss the theoretical status of agency in the contemporary humanist sociology (session I), (2) examine methodological challenges connected with empirical research on social agency (session II), (3) explore the significance of the notion of agency for the analysis of social transformation in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 (session III).

Session I. Social agency in the contemporary debates of theoretical sociology

The discourse on agency is not new. Interdisciplinary in its very nature, it clearly and particularly shapes the condition of contemporary sociology. Sociological theory after the postmodern turn is forced to search for the new ways of researching, understanding and explaining the nature of social world. The perception of social reality as a dynamic and complex process inclines us to abandon deterministic schemes of structuralist analysis. However, it can also contribute to overemphasising the role of intentional individual actions. The theories of social agency aim at bridging the gap between the elusive freedom of individual actions and the stringency of social constraints. Given the

reflexive character of social praxis, the notion of agency is of crucial significance for the analysis of postmodern societies. To what extent does contemporary sociology manage to overcome the dualistic schemes of thinking about an individual and a society, action and structure, subjectivity and objectivity? What is the role of analytical duality and dualism in humanist sociology? Can we find a solution to the main dilemmas of contemporary sociology in the broad spectrum of social theories centred on the situated subject within the structures of social practices (Berger, Luckmann, Giddens, Bourdieu, Archer, Sztompka, Elias, Touraine)? Did sociologists develop a meaningful theory which would be able to describe and explain the processual nature of social reality, acknowledging both the agency of individuals and the structures of social practices? What is the role of the axiological aspects of the agency concept in contemporary sociology?

Session II: Social agency and the methodological challenges of humanistic sociology

The guiding question of the second thematic session is: how shall we study social agency? Classical humanist sociology proposed a method of understanding (*Verstehen*) in order to access the authentic lived experiences of subjects. It assumed that the reconstruction of subjective definitions of situation is an indispensable aspect of explanations in social sciences. However, the classical approach to “understanding” faced an increasingly strong criticism. The proponents of constructivism argued that the “authentic experiences” are never the direct representations of social world and inner world of the subjects studied. They are actively constructed in a research situation, in which both a researcher and a subject negotiate meanings which they attach to social reality. The radical implication of this methodological stance is the change of perspective in social agency research. Social agency is identified with interactional performance, with certain types of narration and self-presentation which are continuously created and re-created in the situation of interview or observation. This raises several questions for humanist sociology. Can we really avoid the question of the relations between narratives and self-presentations, and the practices of agency? What is the role of the “reflexivity” of both subjects and sociologists (researchers) in the analysis of social agency? How can we study the relationships between the performative construction of meanings and the practices of social agents?

Session III: Social agency and civil society in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the third thematic session we would like to encourage the participants to explore the significance of the notion of agency for the analysis of social, economic and political transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. The democratic transformation of postsocialist societies was based

on the assumption that their members would be able, and more importantly, willing to act as active and creative agents of a new market-democratic reality. This basic presumption engendered various practical and theoretical problems. Some researchers and social practitioners argued for the necessity of radical break with the cultural legacy of state socialism. Others expressed a view that a new social reality emerged through the recombination of mental, economic and social resources inherited from the state-socialist period. Much less discussed was the question of the extent to which the discussion on agency in social sciences mirrored the modernisational assumptions of a broader public debate on the paths to development of post-socialist societies. More than two decades of transformation made this question even more pertinent. Can we legitimately reduce the notion of agency to the ideals of a resourceful entrepreneur and a liberal citizen? Are there any other forms of social agency, in its individual and collective dimensions, which emerged in Central and Eastern European societies? In which way various types of social agency are interrelated with the differentiation of life chances, social exclusion and the new forms of symbolic and economic domination that emerged in the region after 1989?

Application procedures

- Conference will be held in English, except for the 3rd thematic session which can exceptionally include papers presented in Polish.
- Please send the abstracts of papers (approx. 500 words, in English) to conference organisers: Irena Szlachcicowa (i.szlachcic@uni.wroc.pl) and Adam Mrozowicki (adam.mrozowicki@wns.uni.wroc.pl).
- Deadline for abstracts submission is **May 15th, 2010**. Information on the acceptance of the papers will be send to the Authors by **May 30th, 2010**.
- Registration fees: (a) **Regular: 450 PLN** (or 115 EUR), (b) **Reduced (PhD students): 250 PLN** (or 65 EUR). Conference registration fee includes: access to all sessions, conference materials, lunch on October 21st and 22nd, coffee breaks, conference dinner on October 21st. Please transfer the applicable fees to accounts specified in the registration form by **June 30th, 2010**. In case of cancellation of participation, registration fees can only be refunded until July 31st 2010.
- Conference organisers plan to publish the best papers in a form of an edited book.
- More information is available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/socialagency2010/> . Please send all additional questions via email to: podmiotowosc2010@gmail.com