

ON THE THEORY OF SOCIETAL CHANGE – GENERAL REMARKS

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1. *Social Theory as a Theory of Change*

1.1. *The Point of Departure*

Especially during the present scientific technical revolution, society is in a state of continual change. One could say there is a constant tension between the existing and future state of affairs. The quality and quantity of the global problems require, however, a search for new solutions. In other words, the *content* of the societal change, in every field of human life, has become the crucial point. In close connection to the problem of content arises the question of the *influence* of the course of change. It is a problem of power and responsibility. This side of the coin is already indicated by the original meaning of the word “politics”; it refers to the taking care of *common* matters. Hence, the societal change cannot be realized without taking account of the problems of *democracy*. Societal change is, in other words, simultaneously a matter of content and political forms.

From the theoretical point of view, this implies that we also must address such basic questions as: What does it *mean* to speak about change? and how do we explain *why* the society has changed in a certain way? The purpose of the present paper is to outline suggestions for answering these kinds of theoretical problems.

1.2. *What Is Change?*

According to a very simplified definition, *change* can be characterized as the passing from one state of affairs (t) to another (q). This definition refers to a concept of change which is neutral with regard to values, because it does not imply any judgment on whether the

new state of affairs is better or worse than the original one. The concepts of development and obviously also that of *progress* require more than mere change. These concepts always include of necessity a comparative aspect. When we speak, for example, of scientific progress, we may refer to the verisimilitude, as *K. R. Popper* does, or following *Thomas Kuhn*— to the discontinuity of the scientific progress. Societal progress, on the other hand, often means a change “for the better”; it is a question of “going forward”. Let us, however, limit ourselves to the theoretical aspect of the matter and thus to a concept of change which is value-neutral.

As has already been mentioned, change means passing from one state of affairs to another. The phenomenon of change may be briefly and trivially represented in the form pTq , in which p is the original state of affairs, q the final one, and the connective T marks the transition. By describing all the changes which have occurred in the world over a certain period, all p 's and q 's, we obtain the *history* of this period. The essential history is the introduction of the time factor: q occurs *after* p .

1.3. *Human Action and Societal Change*

The above picture of change and history lacks reference to the *role of man* in shaping his world. Yet one of the basic problems of the clarification of the role of man in the societal process of change. What can man do and what should he do to maintain or change his societal relationships? This leads us to the concepts of ‘doing’ and ‘act’.

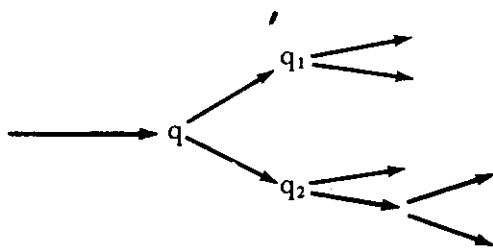
To proceed with the analysis I shall use an elementary figure, which contains one additional element when compared with the above description of the process of change. This element is the (counterfactual) state of affairs (r). It *would have to come about* without the intervention of man. In this way we get the following figure:



In the figure, the state of affairs q which as been *created* by man has been underlined. According to *G. H. von Wright*, one can call human intervention in the course of his *wold acting*. We could say that acts eliminate states of affairs (r) which would have materialized without

human interference. Acts may be very simple, such as closing a window, or complex, as is the case, for example, in a problematic decision-making situation. There is also reason to distinguish between acts performed by individuals and *collective acts*. What is characteristic of the latter is that there is more than one person executing the act and yet its result is not directly caused by the particular action of any one individual. Collective act is more than a mere “sum” of individual persons. Examples of such acts are collegiate decision-making in a court and the legislative process with all its different stages. Thus collective acts are connected with the activities of *organizations*. The act made by an organization cannot be explained only by means of descriptions of individual acts. Therefore it is clear that from a societal point of view collective acts are especially important. In the following, only collective acts will be referred to.

Roughly speaking, an *act* means that somebody takes action as a corollary of which the world is different from what it would have been without that action. In other words: *an act consists of causing change or preventing change*. Consequentially, the theory of societal change is, in the end, a theory of acts. This point can be illustrated by out lining a preliminary “tree of decisions” as follows:



In the figure, the person who acts is assumed to occupy position *p*, where he has behind him history (the past – indicated by a broken line— and before him the future, which is comprised of numerous alternatives. Here the future is quite closed, only two alternatives having been assumed, but in every case the number of alternatives is limited. There are restrictions, weaker or stronger, in several respects. Together they point out which *possibilities* are available to man in the *future*. At least the following three groups of possibilities are significant:

(i) *Physical possibilities*. Human action is restricted by the laws of nature. Man cannot change these laws and he cannot even use them for his own purposes without limitations. In spite of its obviousness

this group of possibilities (or limitations, from another point of view) seems to be of relevance, especially to modern man. We are confronted by a very old problem: to what extent can man interfere with, for example, the ecological balance without sustaining damages?

(ii) *Human possibilities* depend on what man's accumulated skill and knowledge enable him to do. Due to human limitations, man cannot do everything that the physical environment would allow him to do.

(iii) From the point of view of our subject, the most important groups of possibilities are formed by *social possibilities*, i.e., what man can do in the society he has created himself. The social possibilities evolve from the cultural tradition, the social and political structure, the economic basis, and the legal system. The pressure of these kinds of factors shape man's societal field to action.

We can also call the factors determining the different possibilities, for example the laws of nature, human skill and basic economic structure, *determinants* of action in the objective sense of that term. On the basis of an objective determinant, the course of events is of certain kind quite independently of the desires, goals, and beliefs of the agent. In this respect, the concept of objective determinant refers not only to the possibilities but also to the *necessities* that lock the framework of the human activity.

From the *internal* point of view, *motives* and *causal beliefs* of the agent are determinant of quite different kind. Let us take an example used by G. H. von Wright. Somebody (A) closes the door. We ask, *why* did he act precisely in this and not another way? The answer may refer to the following types of factors:

(i) His *goals* or objectives (from a slightly different point of view: his motives); in our example for instance, the goal of preventing the loss of heat from the room, and (ii) his *beliefs* about the state of affairs existing at the moment he performs the act and about the consequences of his intervention. I shall call the former factor *knowledge of purpose*—more precisely consciousness of purpose— and the latter *knowledge of facts*. In order to be able to act in a rational way, A needs both kinds of knowledge. Otherwise, one may say that A acted aimlessly or that he acted on the spur of the moment, by chance, or so on. By using these elements we can render man's action *retrospectively understandable* in cases such as our elementary example as well as in complex societal processes. Indeed, the answer to the question of why A performed act X always refers both to A's purposes and as well as to these beliefs concerning reality. Moreover, when we try to explain A's action, we may be forced to conclude that the action was

necessary in the circumstances in which A was acting. On the basis of his goals and the factual data he had, A could not have acted otherwise. In this way a societal elucidation can provide an explanation of choices that have been made and thus it can permit an *evaluation* of the past.

Let us now return to the concept of an act. An act *consists of* attempting to do something in the conviction that the means chosen actually enables us to achieve the goal concerned. In other words, perceiving the structure of the act helps us to understand not only previous acts (history) but also *our own present action*. This applies to our action both in private life as well in politics. In stating this I imply that political action is also only a sum of acts and that understanding the nature of politics is to an important extent understanding the concept of an act.

The internal point of view of the human action is, however, only one side of the coin. The agent may have unjustified goal settings. His causal beliefs may fail and his empirical information about the present state of the world may be incorrect. Simply, the agent can believe have done something that, in fact, has happened quite independently of his measures. Hence, the intentional explanation of the societal change at issue may be totally misleading as to its content.

This means that in order to get a reliable conception about the change in the society, the *external* (objective) determinants must find their proper role in the theory. Let us begin with the following provisional statement on the societal significance of acts: *the societal process is action, the scope of which is determined partly by limitations external to man (physical limitations), partly by restrictions inherent in man himself (human limitations), and partly by limitations resulting from the social reality created by man (social limitations).*

2. Determinism and the Human Activity

2.1. The Dilemma of Voluntarism

As we know, this set of problems is closely linked to the controversy between materialism and idealism or to the distinctions related to this controversy. Roy Bhaskar schematizes the situation by speaking of four tendencies in social thought. They are schematically the following ones:

Tendency	Method	Object
Bentham	empiricist	individualist
Weber	neo-Kantian	individualist
Durkheim	empiricist	collectivist
Marx	realist	relational

In this context, the attention has to be paid especially to two of the tendencies mentioned above. According to Bhaskar, the Weberian stereotype of thinking is a *voluntarist* one. Social objects are in this theory seen as the results of (or as constituted by) intentional or meaningful human behavior. Neo-Wittgensteinian and/or herneutical social philosophers, *Peter Winch* being an example of the former and *Jurgen Habermas* of the latter, belong also to this tendency of social thought.

As a representative of the *realist* tendency, Bhaskar himself emphasizes, in agreement with Karl Marx, that it is no longer true to say that men *create* society. Rather, men reproduce or transform it. What does it mean? Bhaskar is ready to claim that all social activity presupposes the *prior existence of social forms*. On the basis of this assumption, the Marxist tendency, for example, is of relational and realist nature. Bhaskar writes: "Thus if the social cannot be reduced to (and is not the product of) the individual, it is equally clear that society is a necessary condition for any intentional human act at all" (*op. cit.*, p. 43). In other words, society is both the ever-present *condition* (material cause) and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency. The key point in this kind of thought is that intentionality, and sometimes self-consciousness, characterize human actions *but not transformations* in the social structure. People, in their conscious activity, "for the most part unconsciously reproduce (and occasionally transform) the structures governing their substantive activities of production" (Bhaskar, *op. cit.*, p. 44). Social structures are, for Bhaskar, like the rules of grammar that impose the limits of speech but do not determine the content of the linguistic performance. Hence, people do not *create* society. It always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity. And furthermore, the problem of societal change does not consist in the ways of explaining human *actions*. In order to understand the socie-

tal change, one must analyze the *possibilities* and *necessities* that determine the human activity.

This means that in order to get a reliable conception about the change at issue may be totally misleading as to its content.

2.2. *Structural Causality*

In this way we are faced with a problem of *societal laws*. Is man's destiny decided by certain societal mechanisms or is he in some important sense the architect of his own future? This is, I think, the kernel of good sense at the heart of the so-called *determinism* thesis as far as social behavior is concerned. Determinism thesis is sometimes presented as a vulgar idea of mechanistic explanation of society. For Bhaskar, the idea of determinism is not a thesis of this kind. Bhaskar argues only for the pre-existence of certain social forms. On the other hand, the concept of "pre-existence" remains quite unclear in his analysis. Social forms are *not only* transcendental pre-conditions for human activities (for man to be homo socialis) *but also* causal conditions of this activity. What does the latter feature of pre-existence mean? According to my interpretation, it involves a standpoint that social forms *determine* causally, although not in the nomic sense of the notion, the human activity. These forms give the *structure* according to which the changes realize in the society. Referring to that point of view, Bhaskar uses the term *structural causality*. Roughly speaking, structural causality is the same as *tendencies* or trends. In every case, structural causality is something much "softer" than the human causality. All in all, human beings do not consciously and intentionally change the social reality. It is changed according to the structural causality.

Let us now recall Bhaskar's point of departure. He makes a sharp distinction between voluntarism and realism. Weber is voluntarist in this scale. The conception presented by Bhaskar (and also by Marx) is, on the other hand, a realist one. I do not take any stand concerning this dichotomy *in general*. The aim of the present contribution is only to show that also on the basis of a voluntarist theory, the idea of structural causality can be defended. In that case, however, certain specifications concerning the structural causality as well as concerning the theory of action are unavoidable. In order to argue my statement I invite the reader to follow my reasoning a bit further on.

2.3. *Theory of Action and Its Limitations*

In the example presented in the scheme of “life tree,” man himself shapes his own life situation by choosing among alternatives. By choosing alternative q_1 , the decision-maker excludes certain other branches of the “life tree.” After this choice the other possibilities, leading to alternative q_2 , are no longer available, at least without special measures. On the other hand, choice q_1 is also subject to many external limitations. Therefore, there is justification to speak of *interaction* between man and the reality which surrounds him. As the outcome of every choice, the situation changes and produces a *new basis* for still other choices.

By using the concepts “*necessary*” and “*possible*,” the different determinants circumscribe the set of possibilities within which the decision-maker has to exercise his choice. It is as if making a choice eliminates something from this set. Now, when an act is examined *retrospectively* and all the elements having determined the solution are taken into account, we can say that in the light of certain factors the act was *necessary*, that it would have been impossible to act otherwise. Nevertheless, necessity is relative, because one of the factors creating it has been the choices previously made by man. Those choices eliminated something which would have prevented the necessity of the act from arising.

The dichotomy of necessity and possibility mentioned above is closely linked with the concept of so-called societal law. Indeed, if one accepts my interpretation of necessity and possibility, the *mechanistic* explanation of society does not seem justified. What happens in society does not follow the laws of causality, if causality is understood in the sense of classical mechanics or as statistical causality in quantum theory. At the most there would seem to be justification for speaking, as Bhaskar does, of certain *tendencies* or *trends*. Perhaps also the term law may be used, although it may lead to conclusions which are too mechanistic.

Whatever expression is used, the most important idea in this line of thought is that *also the determinants themselves* depend partly on man. For instance, the economy is not external to man or independent of his conscious action. On the contrary, according to what Bhaskar claims, it is the product of numerous conscious and partially unconscious choices in a history spanning thousands of years. Nevertheless, in its present form it has the nature of a determinant which can be ultimately regulated by man. This regulation cannot be performed by an individual, a community, a class, a na-

tion, or an international organization acting on its own. All the same, man is the only agent which *can* (partially), consciously, change its creations.

Man's ability to influence the determinants, *i.e.*, his own limitations, varies according to the situation and the time concerned. Therefore, there can be no pattern of thought ("formula") given once and for all, covering all cases and dictating definitely the contents of social activities. Possibilities and necessities can (and should) be analyzed in concrete situations. What applies to country A at the moment t_1 does not necessarily apply at the moment t_2 or to country B at the moment t_1 .

Yet what is, on this basis, the role of the theory of action as the theory of societal change. The answer is quite simple. The theory of action as such describes only the *structure* of human actions. It makes understandable what the term "action" *means*. On the other hand, it has, to some extent, explanatory force. By means of the theory of action one can explain intentionally, *why* the agent A behaved in the way he did. In the explanation, one refers to A's motives and causal beliefs that are the internal determinants of the action. The explanation is internal as to its nature.

Yet, if the theory of action, understood in this sense of the word, will be completed with two background assumptions, it takes on *external* societal significance as well. These assumptions are:

- 1) Certain external determinants point out the possibilities for human activity but
- 2) the agent himself can —to some extent— consciously *form* the determinants.

On the basis of these assumptions, the theory of action has societal significance both as a *retrospective* and a *prospective* theory of the societal change. Retrospectively the theory of action, in connection to its background assumptions, makes it possible to understand and explain the past events. The explanation is, for instance, of the following kind: the agent A had the alternatives $X_1 \dots X_n$ at his disposal but he chose X_1 because of his motives, M , and his causal beliefs, B . As a prospective theory of societal change, the theory of action makes possible to *predict* future societal behavior —on certain presuppositions. First, on the basis of the mere information concerning the agent's motive and beliefs, it is, in principle, impossible to forecast the future *actions*. The motives and causal beliefs may, for instance, change before the real action. Hence, the prediction of the future societal actions concerns not the content of the action but the *framework* of the action. By framework, I mean the fact

that motives and beliefs remain the same until the action is realized. This is, however, not enough for an accurate prediction. We must also know which *possibilities* and *necessities* are available to the agent. If some kind of behavior is totally impossible for the agent, the prediction based on the agent's (failing) motives and beliefs is worthless. A realistic prediction must, in other words, be built on information concerning the internal *and* external determinants of the action. If and only if we have enough information concerning these factors, we can understand and predict the future societal changes. In *this* sense, also, the voluntarist theory of society forms a fruitful basis for the theory of societal change.

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