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Ecology and Social Science

INTRODUCTION

If you take the new, big, standard textbook of Danish sociology, "Sociologi under forandring", edited by Peter Gundelach, Nils Mortensen and Jens Chr. Tonboe (1990), which will give you a good picture of the extent of Danish sociology, you will not find any article about ecology and social science. But there are articles about gender, health and religion. It says something fundamental about the social sciences' relation to ecology: The lack of conceptualizing of man's relation to nature. That impression is confirmed by investigating other standard textbooks in the other social sciences used in the Danish universities.

I will try to provide an explanation for this, and I will argue that this situation is now beginning to change, because I think, we are going into a period with more fundamental changes of paradigms in the social sciences, in which man's relation to nature will have a central significance. 1)

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AS MODERNISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS

That the social sciences have nearly ignored man's relation to nature in their approaches or, rather, not problematized it, but have had an unconscious conception of the man-nature relation as an utilitarian-dominant relation, is connected with the fact that the social sciences are part of a specific, modernist consciousness.

In the middle ages, religion penetrated the entire society and legitimized all activities in the society. After the Renaissance and the creation of the modern capitalist society, science and modern ideology took over the position of legitimizing the social order and the exploitation of nature, which industrialism effected. Both in the new science and in the classical ideologies, man was placed in the centre, where religion had placed God and cosmos as a perspective starting point. It was the ideologies, which

were constituting persons. Man and social classes were, here, seen as creating historical actors, who could change the world.

In this way, the conception of nature, society and man were changed. Man's relation to nature was rationalized in the way that man dominated nature and made it useful for man's own purpose. Nature lost, in this way, a normative status. All this happened through the process of using the new natural sciences and the growth in the productivity of labour, when the market economy expanded. Men's relation to each other was also rationalized. It took place when there were formed purely secularized norms for social cooperation, norms which were to be universal and could be rationally based. It was all a part of creating predictive, human behaviour. But it also meant a rationalizing of man's relation to himself. Similar to the outer domination of nature, there was created a domination of the inner nature, in which the goal was to create responsibility and autonomy or some sort of culture. Man was, in this way, formed to be a rational, egoistic creature of needs and interests.

The American sociologist, Peter L. Berger (1977), has formulated 5 characteristics for modernity: 1. Abstraction. 2. Futurity. 3. Individuality. 4. Liberation. 5. Secularization.

Abstraction has its roots in the dominance of abstract wage labour and means that a quantifying and atomistic understanding is advanced. Feeling, sensualism and passion are repressed in relation to a quantifying attitude to life. Futurity means that one is always oriented toward the future. It is reflected in an on-going ambition, restlessness and an incapacity to rest. Time is a purely quantitative conception and has become a problem, because one has become a slave of time. Individuality means that men are going out of their former relation to nature and their collective cooperation and, for the first time in history, are becoming true individuals. Liberation is associated with individuality, and means liberation from a former destiny, which one was subject to. Now one feels that one has freedom to choose, to form one's own life and the life of the society. Last there is secularization, which means that the horizon of the former religious faith and experience was undermined.

The American sociologist, Daniel Bell (1990), has formulated it in another way, but pointing in the same direction. Metaphysically, modernity meant a movement from God and nature, which were the two axes for christian and classical philosophy, to

history as a searching after the realization of man. It was a descending from the Natural Law, which bound God and men, to the Philosophy of History as a basis of judgement. The other, ordering principle, which was characteristic for modernity, is the change from Natural Law to Natural History. In Montesquieu's "The Spirit of Laws" it was said that laws were shaped by the different societies and their specific "spirit".

It is in this historical situation that the modern sociological consciousness is created. Bell has formulated its new metaphysic in these points: 1. Society is not a natural order defined by a telos, but a social contract in which the individual, not the polis or the community, is the primary unit of society, and in which the rights of the individual become the foundation of the political order. 2. Social life is seen as a movement from nature to culture, in which human nature is seen as a "second nature" imposed on an original human nature. Social life is an artifice. 3. Religion is criticized as a veil over man's self-understanding. The criticism of religion was the foundation of the criticism of society and was the starting point of ideology. In modernity, religion was replaced by ideology. 4. Modernity emphasized the autonomy of realms. In the classical view, ethics and politics, law and morality, are joined. 5. The modern view acknowledged the variability of human nature. Man is less bound by biology than by culture and environment, so that one cannot specify any definition of man by essential characteristics.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SOCIAL DETERMINISM

Sociology's lack of interest in the relation between society and nature is formed in this early dissociation both from the cultural tradition and from nature. In this scientific social horizon, all social phenomena are seen as created by thinking and social action. It has resulted in a form of ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism. Durkheim is a classical representative of this tendency. He pointed out the objective reality of the social facts and turned against the view that social conditions should be reduced to psychological, individual or natural conditions. Social conditions were socially determined. In the 19. century, many sociologists worked with the meaning of physical and biological conditions for social life. But, in the 20. century, there has been a general movement away from the physical and biological determinant's meaning for social life. It has taken place in the form of an anti-reductionist and anti-determinist ideology against certain cases of attempts to interpret social

phenomena exclusively from physical and biological factors. In this movement, it has nearly gone to the opposite extreme, and has ignored the meaning of these factors and, in this way, come close to some sort of social reductionism and determinism. One received a nearly closed view of society. Social, individual and natural phenomena are determined exclusively by social conditions. It is strengthened by the tendency to attach importance to the social actors' understanding and language for the definition of the social. In this way, one ignores the meaning of the more objective, environmental factors for the definition of society and the organization of the social logic.

In sociology, this development can be seen in urban sociology. Here the sociologists have gradually left physical nature to the geographers in the division of labour between the sciences. One has got a new type of geographer - cultural geographer, not only natural geographer. In this process, sociology is cleared of nature. This development is also a reaction against the misuse of nature, geography and race in the nazi and fascist ideology, in which these factors played a fundamental role.

Mass-psychology, geo-politics and racial biology were, for many years, for many scientists, all unjustified and automatically associated with nazism, which blocked the formulation of some problems in the social sciences.

THE DISTANCING OF THE ECONOMIC AND THE POLITICAL SCIENCES FROM NATURE

Modern, economic science, which sees itself as autonomous in relation to ethics and morality, is built upon a specific view of man and nature. Nature is seen as a useful resource, which shall be dominated. There is no absolute scarcity of resources. Scarcity is only relative. In the same way, man is seen as a rational, egoistic creature of needs with unlimited needs (homo economicus). Such a concept of nature provides an opportunity for unlimited growth, and the concept of man suggests that economic growth is desirable²⁾

Where nature, in the old classical economic conceptions, was considered as the most important condition for economic life, nature is, in the modern economic theory, seen only as one of many factors of production. Where the classical economist called nature the primary factor of production, the value theory changed in the industrial

society, first to a labour value theory, since to a subjective, marginal theory of utility. Gradually land disappeared or was reduced to a residual factor in the economic models, because land was seen as a factor substitutable by capital. It can be seen in growth models and is a symbol of how much one can neglect nature in social theory.

Similarly, the dominating conceptions of politics in industrial society have neglected nature and have been built on a conception of power and interest connected with the state or the market as the fundamental structure in modern society. That men are not only connected to each other through threat and exchange, but also are involved in relations of integration in society, are concepts that, generally, have been neglected in industrial society.

CHANGE OF PARADIGMS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Within the last twenty years, there has taken place, in connection with the appearance of new social movements, especially the women's movement and the environmental movement, a change in the conception of nature, man and gender, which has also been important for the social sciences. Now one can see the outline of a post-modern social science, which, not alone, breaks down the old walls between the different disciplines in the social sciences, but also questions the general divisions between the sciences, between natural, human and social science.

NATURE AS A LIVING ORGANISM

In the new, natural sciences, some people have gone from seeing nature as "dead" to seeing it as "living". In the classical, natural sciences, the theory said that there was a cleavage between "dead" physics and "living" biology, and it was normal to try to understand and explain the separation of living nature from the dead. Now the Belgian chemists, Ilja Prigogine and Isabelle Stenger, have shown that the biological order is not necessarily in conflict with the law of entropy. With their experiments with "dissipative structures", they have given a proof of nature's capacity to self-organize. Therefore, they are talking about "a new covenant between man and universe."

But central to the new conception of nature, there has also been a cultural-philosophical revival of some suppressed conceptions of nature in our culture. The Danish theologian, Ole Jensen (1976), is one, in Denmark, who has tried to give a picture of a multi-dimensional, modern conception of nature against the dominating conception of nature, which mainly has seen nature as a means for men's production. Nature is also a partner in companionship with man, a source of joy, and finally a factor of destruction. These additions are creating a more open, confictual and realistic conception. But it is never unproblematic to use suppressed ideas and conceptions in a culture, because they often, in their development, tend to be just as one-sided as the dominating ideas, they are in opposition to.

A NEW AND EXTENDED CONCEPTION OF MAN

There is a connection between the conception of nature and the conception of man. The one-sided treatment of the outer nature in the modern, industrial society can be seen as a mirror of our culture's one-sided attitude toward the nature of man. The appearance of a new conception of nature in industrial society, in which the domination and objectification of nature became central, took place at the same time that man was endowed with needs. With the development of the capitalistic market, there were, at the same time, created anonymous ways of satisfying the needs, and the differentiation of the opportunities to satisfy the needs expanded. The concept of interest as a description of men's behaviour was also new and is connected with the concept of need. To behave according to one's interests was, in the new conception of man, the same as to satisfy one's needs after a rational-egoistic reflection. It was now considered to be in the interest of an individual to earn money and accumulate wealth. It made human behaviour predictive and rational, characteristics which were needed by the new, market society. Marx reacted against a liberal-individualistic understanding of needs and interests, but Marxism was also marked by aistic-rational conception of man. In the Marxist conception, man's non-instrumental relation to nature, other men and man's spiritual-religious dimensions were suppressed.

Men are not only creatures of needs. They have also the potential for an identifying relationship with nature. It is a non-determined, non-consuming relationship with nature, which is coming to expression in nature feeling, meditation and worship. These are the dimensions of human nature, which are being ignored and must be

made conscious in the development of another conception of nature. But men are also social persons in a community, who have needs for living in good, communicative, social communities. Men are not, first of all, individuals, but live in a profound interdependence with each other. Finally, men have, in the words of the famous psychologist, Abraham Maslow (1971), a need for self-actualizing, which appears in the opportunities for coming in contact with both the subconsciousness and a trans-personal consciousness, where men, in an ego-transcending and self-forgetting condition, feel connected, not only with nature and other men, but also with something divine.

A conception of man will always be associated with other, central ideas and pictures of the world. The narrow need and interest conception in industrial society is a mirror of a narrow, isitic conception of nature, in the same way as a humanistic-religious conception of man, as I have advocated, corresponds to an extended, ecological conception of nature, in which nature is seen as living and associated with man. And, in a broader sense, the specific pictures of nature and man are important in defining economy and politics. If one wants to break with the dominating conceptions of economy and politics, one must have alternative conceptions of both man and nature.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

One sees this new conception of nature and man reflected in the ecological economy's idea of a sustainable development. In "Our Common Future", from The World Commission on Environment and Development, a sustainable development is defined as "a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 43). In this conception, there are two notions: 1. The notion of need, especially giving priority to the basic needs of the world's poor and 2. The notion of the restriction which the level of technology and social organization puts on the environment in meeting the present and future needs.

Contained in the idea of sustainable development are three values:³ 1. There are limits in nature for human intervention - ecological balances which must be respected. Nature contains qualities, meaning and rationality, which must be respected. 2. A conception of human needs in which one operates with an idea of absolute or basic

needs, which shall be met before relative or non-basic needs. 3. Finally, there is a conception of equity and justice between generations.

In "Our Common Future", it is not clearly articulated that the values behind the idea of sustainable development go against the dominating conception of nature and man in our industrial society and the liberal and Marxist inspired paradigms in the social sciences: 1. Nature is not only a dead resource, which is free and good. There is not only a relative scarcity, but also an absolute scarcity. Nature is not only a resource for narrow management for men. It has an intrinsic value. It is living, and men have the opportunity and the duty to take care of it and respect its balances and sustainability. In spite of that, a definition of sustainability can never be objective. 2. Man is not only an economic, need creature with infinite needs. Man also has a need for self-realization, has spiritual needs and potentials for taking care of nature and other people. In the dominating, isitic picture of nature and man, there is a desire and opportunity for, economic growth. But, in the new conception of sustainable development, there is a conception of physical limits to growth in relation to nature and moral limits to growth in man.

Notes.

1. The arguments in this article build on my new book: Erik Christensen: Nye værdier i politik og samfund. Paradigmeskift og kulturbyrdninger. Hovedland. 1990
2. A new ecological paradigm in economy - a steady state conception - is especially developed by the American economist, Herman E. Daly (1977), Steady-state economics. The economics of biophysical equilibrium and moral growth. Freeman and Comp. San Francisco
3. See Erik Christensen: Hvad er "en bæredygtig udvikling"? Tendens 3. årg. nr. 1. April 1991.

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