

Time to Change the Subject: A New Sociology of Praxis

Critical Sociology

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**R. A. Dello Buono**

Manhattan College, USA

For at least half a century, social constructionism strongly marked the course of sociological studies of social problems. Its presence was felt in social problems textbooks, various dedicated book series, and within the discipline's major professional associations, particularly the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) where many seminal constructionists served as presiding officers and/or as editors of the association's journal *Social Problems*. After decades of glory, however, the winds of paradigmatic change may be blowing in new directions.

The deepening global crisis confronting the early 21st Century has shaken the social sciences. Powerful and increasingly transnational social movements have emerged in response to the dictates of global capital across the global North and South. The historical moment demands that we as academics, social scientists and social practitioners work in better tandem with these popular movements, channeling our efforts more directly to synergize and concretize emerging visions of another possible world. All of this requires a revitalized sociological imagination, a concerted *re-imagination* that goes beyond critical analysis and places renewed emphasis on collective response and strategy building. Social constructionism, never well-suited for this task, has fallen ever further behind the curve of social change, leaving a theoretical vacuum in social problems research in its wake.

Critical sociologists should seize the moment and move decisively through this open door. The challenge is to re-make the overly subjectivistic analyses of constructionism and re-link with the material and structural elements of 21st century capitalist crises. An authentically dialectical approach to social problems is needed that informs active praxis rather than engaging in endless ontological inquiry or flooding an overly-determined critique. This clearly requires a renewed emphasis on the material reality of popular social construction as opposed to the ephemeral and politically-bracketed analyses of the inter-subjective constructionist project. Our aim should be to implant an insurgent attitude into the discipline that not only preaches the necessity of structural change but actively informs it with strategic analysis. The historical moment demands that we replace the docile and politically useless attitude of detached reflexivity that has plagued sociological inquiry for decades, particularly in the global North.

In all of the paradigmatic wrangling of recent years, the real overarching problem with constructionism was rarely discussed within their ranks, namely, that the perspective remained largely trapped in political irrelevance and uncomfortably restrained by its most orthodox currents. Writing

Corresponding author:

R A Dello Buono, Manhattan College, 4513 Manhattan College Pkwy, New York, NY 10463, USA.

Email: ricardo.dellobuono@manhattan.edu

at the turn of the century, Ian Hacking put it this way: ‘social constructionism [initially] carried excellent shock value but it became tired; [worse yet,] it became part of the discourse that it is trying to undo’ (2000: 25–36). A more charitable reading of the constructionist project was offered by left postmodernist Stephen Pfohl (2004) who portrayed constructionism as a historically pivotal development that helped pave the way to the radical Foucauldian tradition. According to Pfohl, ‘the social constructionist perspective carved out a conceptual space for a radical reading (and writing) of social problems as nothing but the cultural, political, and material effects of the human struggle for the organization of power in (and as) history. Within this space we are invited to imagine that those “things” we experience, define and react to as problematic are in “fact,” never independent of the differentiating social practices which produce them’ (2004: 62).

In my view, the principal defect of social constructionism rests in its political limits, its failure to adequately situate the subjective elements of analysis in the objectively real context of capitalist domination, and its inability to adequately interface with the ‘actually existing’ struggles underway to transform and transcend it. The urgent task for critical sociologists is to move beyond social constructionism into deeper levels of analysis and strategy because the crisis is not merely a symbolic object of inquiry, but a real, materially discernable challenge to human survival. At minimum, a viable social ontology is needed to counter the subjectivistic excesses of constructionism to the end of preserving its most salient insights and incorporating them into a more powerful synthesis of social problems inquiry. A critical approach that privileges the centrality of transformational praxis within the historically defined relations of the larger political economy implies a dialectical model capable of addressing the objectivistic-subjectivistic elements of social change. If accomplished, this could dramatically help recalibrate the discipline’s capability for closing ranks with emerging 21st century social movement militancies. It might also begin to close the disciplinary gap with the kinds of critical sociology now being practiced in the global South.

To this end, an avenue worthy of further exploration can be traced to the legacy of György Lukács whose close contact with Max Weber forced him early on to confront the objectivist-subjectivist dilemma from a politicized, Marxist point of view. Weber’s mission was to free up the Germanic social sciences from its crippling epistemological disputes so that it could emerge as a respectable social science worthy of the German academy. Lukács in contrast sought to preserve the critical bite of Hegelian dialectics within Marxism for the purpose of better comprehending social change and informing social transformation. The work of Lukács is most widely known as an early critic of dogmatic versions of dialectical materialism, the essential kernel of which could be found in his *History and Class Consciousness* (1971 [1923]). In this early 20th century work, Lukács’ critique of Weber strongly influenced his later thinking and, together with the work of Gramsci, would later provide a powerful impetus for spawning neo-marxist currents including the Frankfurt School.

Recent studies of Lukács, however, have placed greater emphasis on his later work in which he continued to develop and deepen his analysis of social ontology. His lifelong concern was to keep the Marxian dialectical formulation intact in which militant human praxis is the sole source of emancipatory social change. Indeed, Lukács always paid considerable attention to Marx’s philosophic encounter with Hegel. The principle defect of the Hegelian mindset, according to Lukács (1978: 62), was Hegel’s own insistence on the ‘methodological priority of logic in his system’, something that sealed the fate of the ‘System’ that would be so recklessly posed as the ‘End of Philosophy’. In contemporary terms, this is akin to neoliberal ideologues declaring an ‘end of history’, precisely at the historical moment when the neoliberal project first began to falter under the weight of its own structural contradictions. From Lukács’ point of view, Hegel’s dialectical method achieved its full sociological significance within the development of Marxian social thought, only to later be suppressed by two great waves of reactionary thinking. The first occurred with the

resurrection of an epistemological *status quo ante* as expressed in various forms of neo-Kantianism most notably popularized by his friend Max Weber, and subsequently but less successfully taking an even more reactionary turn in the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz. The other wave was associated with the stagnation of social sciences under Stalinism that became perpetuated under "actually existing socialism" in which a regime-sponsored version of dialectical materialism led to a major collapse of the critical and dialectical thrust of Marxism.

For Lukács, the ontology of contradictory social processes is the salient form of a unified social whole, offering a complexity that lends itself towards critique and social transformation. The totality of the social problem is constituted by the dynamic interconnections of historically particular elemental moments. In this case, the epistemological necessity that emerges is clear. If social reality itself is invariably a result of dynamic process, this reality can only be comprehended through a processual approach. As Lukas pointed out, Lenin notably grasped the importance of this in the epistemological reflections found in his *Philosophical Notebooks* where he describes the Hegelian dialectical method as a critical approach carrying a 'theory of knowledge' (Lukács, 1978: 78). Lukács thus sees in Lenin's work a dialectical approach that both captures the objective dynamic of the social reality as well as elucidates the academic path to grasping it, doing so in a way that promotes progressive social transformation within the existent possibilities of the historical moment.

For Lukács, the central unifying category that arises is that of praxis. Following this insight, a sociology rooted in praxis is not a theory of how to manage irresolvable contradictions. Rather, it is one based in theorizing about the ways in which irresolvable contradictions can be understood as unfolding in history, generating an emancipatory dynamic of social change aimed at their resolution. The political and strategic significance derives from how human participants can step back, analyze, and re-insert themselves in this history in an organized fashion capable of favorably altering its course. As Gramsci (1971) put it, praxis is where understanding is inextricably integrated with activism, with politics, and with making history.

Fast forwarding to the present, much of the leg work in gleaning the seminal insights of Lukács and reinterpreting them for the 21st Century context has already been performed in the work of István Mészáros, another Hungarian critical theorist (see Mészáros, 1995, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). Mészáros was a former student of Lukács and has in recent years emerged as a leading Marxist theoretician of social transformation. Sharing with Lukács a critical, Eastern European sensibility alongside of an immersion in Western academia, Mészáros has broken new ground in exploring the contours of social change while remaining acutely sensitive to the structural limits imposed by global capital. Hugo Chávez cited Mészáros as a major theoretical inspiration for the creation of 21st Century socialism in which the line of analysis builds a structural approach to the political requirements of revolutionary transformation.

Building on this approach, we get a prototype for envisioning how the 'social construction of reality' can be replaced with re-imagining the reality of social construction. The contribution of Mészáros is to hone in on the attendant mediations that allow for the systemic reproduction of global capital. As Gramsci and others have argued, any construction of a counter-hegemonic set of mediations must by real necessity emerge out of ongoing practices of resistance and struggle. The active engagement of practical activity designed to resist, dismantle, and transform exploitative structures into proto-humanistic ones requires a unified grasp of objective and subjective dynamics, something that has invariably proved elusive in popular emancipatory projects.

In his analysis, Mészáros distinguishes between first and second order mediations. Second order mediations under capitalism essentially consist of alienated practices in the Marxian sense, involving an inevitably hierarchical practice of appropriation of the product of laborers under specific conditions of structured relations of production in which some dynamic degree of control over the

laborers is exerted. First order mediations, in contrast, consist of all those principles of coordination that indispensably provide for reproduction of production relations in a systemic configuration. Mészáros seeks to pull back onto the playing field all of the principles that are generally kept hidden by the capitalist system, whether attributable to inherent qualities of the human condition or to the functional prerequisites of modern, industrial production. In political terms, the effective empowerment of unwilling systemic participants in their collective self-exploitation at least in part requires exposing the nerves of that system's ongoing reproductive mechanisms. In short, the analysis is structurally material but the punch line is sufficiently expansive to encompass the terrain more ephemerally discussed in the power analyses of left-postmodernists.

It is here that the Mészáros critique of Lukács is instructive. Lukács aimed to reunite the subjective and objective aspects of capitalist crisis, and this meant transcending the subjective alienation of the worker from his objectified conditions in wage-labor. This total reconciliation of the subject and object has, of course, never existed in history and its postulation as given by Lukács presents serious logical contradictions for any ongoing emancipatory struggle. What is both possible and necessary is the re-constitution of the creative human laborer in unity with the objective relations that require the continual exercise of that creativity in production, rather than with those that must suppress it in order to achieve their reproduction (Mészáros, 2010b: 312). In this sense, Lukács was inhibited through his inability to fully disengage from the influence of Weber's dualistic, neo-Kantian conception of human subjectivity that still lingers to this day in much of progressive sociology.

At the same time, Mészáros' structural approach decisively departs from the Hegelian-Marxist approach. While this is resented by followers of the various currents of Marxist-Humanism, including the version fashioned by Raya Dunayevskaya (see Hudis, 1997), it enables Mészáros to form a fresher assessment of concrete strategizing for 'actually existing' revolutionary movements. In the context of consciously intended social transformation, a creative dedication to emancipatory struggle must be continually re-examined, assessed and re-formulated in accordance with the enabling possibility presented by a larger social movement. As Mészáros puts it: 'In view of the structural crisis of the capital system in its entirety, the conflict in question is structural and not conjunctural... and the magnitude of the stakes involved could not be greater... Only the historically viable institution and consolidation of the hegemonic alternative to capital's ever more destructive social reproductive order can offer a way out from our deepening structural crisis' (Mészáros, 2010a: 270).

Another critical element of re-imagining social problems via a praxis-centered approach is the active pursuit of self-critique. The ongoing attempt to unite theory and practice requires continual confrontation with envisioned goals and concrete dilemmas, theoretically informed strategies and practical results. Throughout his voluminous work, Mészáros insists on retaining a radically different imaginary of human social relations present in dialectical analysis, the only practical alternative to walking the theoretical gangplank into a terminal Weberian cynicism. In the end, a critical, dialectical approach aimed at fueling strategy for popular movements is the alternative for moving beyond academic social constructionism towards the reconstruction of a praxis-oriented sociology of social problems (Dello Buono, 2013). Emancipation is no longer some future apocalyptic event but rather, as Gramsci argued, a process of struggle where problems are confronted through praxis at first as difference, then as antagonism and autonomy, and finally through the destruction of the forms and forces which it counters and which counter it. In this view, the future is already contained in the present; it is contained as a process, not as an event, and is a contradictory presence. Problems are resolved as new problems arise, driven by the underlying systemic contradictions of the larger system (Gramsci, 1971: 462).

It has now been 70 years since the US sociologist C. Wright Mills published his critique of the ‘social pathologists’ who saw social problems ‘in a fragmentary way ... not focused on larger stratifications or upon structured wholes... failing to consider whether or not certain groups or individuals caught in economically underprivileged situations can possibly obtain the current goals without drastic shifts in the basic institutions which channel and promote them’ (Mills, 1943). Today, in the deep throes of global crisis, Mészáros echoes and qualifies this insight when he argues that every set of historical social relations establishes certain structural limits by which it is impossible to go beyond without disrupting the ongoing reproduction of those social relations as embedded in a social metabolic, self-expanding process (Mészáros, 2010b). This observation foretells the mass mobilizations that are breaking out all around the globe as capital bumps up against its limits, including its absolute ecological limits. In *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, Mészáros excerpts the electrifying declaration of Hugo Chavez at the 2006 World Social Forum: ‘I believe that it is not for us to speak in terms of future centuries... we have no time to waste; the challenge is to save the conditions to life on this planet, to save the human species, to change the course of history, to change the world’ (Mészáros, 2010b: 140). This kind of social change emerges out of the interstitial spaces of structural dilemmas that cannot be resolved within capitalist practice. Transformative solutions to urgent social problems can only grow out of an insurgent praxis that actively engages and defies the structural regime with a strategic and decidedly emancipatory agenda. Critical sociologists must reclaim their place in this struggle.

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