Knowledge Society and Sociological Theory: Prospects and Obstacles

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Abstract: Globalization and its handmaid knowledge society are bringing about a major change in the entire social system and this in turn is creating several discontinuities in the social order in many parts of the world. In some countries, the traditional economy has been thrown out of equilibrium, in some others, the political system has been destabilized and in all countries, the existing social order based mostly on conformity has been dislocated or derailed. This study examines, the prospect of sociological theory in the wake of Information Technology (IT) and Knowledge Revolution (KR) that are overtaking societies and that are upsetting many of the traditional values and norms of behavior of individuals and organizations in society. It tries to habilitate sociology and its theoretical underpinnings in the matrix of the knowledge society built on Information Technology (IT).

Key words: Technology, theory, norms, knowledge, social relationships, social organizations, values

INTRODUCTION

Information Technology (IT) has provided sumptuous food for those who want to question the sanctity and usefulness of many precepts in the social and behavioral sciences, which have assumed man as being conditioned and regulated by certain socially established parameters. In so far as IT and KR have generated and popularized new values and norms for humans to behave, there is no a priori reason to assume that conventional sociological theories of human behavior and the social process based on them, would work as smoothly and uncontested as before. In fact, their relevance is being increasingly questioned and their usefulness as tools for analysis and interpretation of social dynamics is getting increasingly devalued at several quarters.

Sociological theories are in a state of stagnation today. Grand theories remain intact, but with reduced halo. They continue to be respected, because of their intrinsic worth, but sparingly used by practitioners.

Middle range theories also have survived many attacks and enjoy the same fate (Siedman, 2004). But this cannot be said of micro level theories, their number being legion. Because the subject matter of sociology has proliferated into many areas and sub-areas, theories at micro level do not have similar appeal and are little attempted by researchers or approved by peers. Even if one attempts to build a theory, its applicability will be circumscribed for several reasons.

Further in the prevailing volatile social situation, a new theory will not have long life and may become redundant the moment it comes out of the testing ground.

However, there are sociologists who believe that sociology could survive without new theories (Bulmer, 1990; Kumar, 1995; Wallerstein, 2000; Bech, 2000).

OBSTACLES TO THEORY BUILDING

There are several obstacles to theory building. These may be divided into three groups: first, obstacles from within the science of society, second, obstacles created by IT and related factors and third obstacles created by Knowledge Revolution (KR). Actually, the dividing line between second and third is very hazy and there are several overlaps between them.

Only a summary of the factors from within is given here because my focus is on the other two. Because of the all comprehensive nature of the science of society and flexible boundary lines, scholars have a tendency to include everything under the sun as coming within the purview of sociology. As a result, a unified theory embracing all the heterogeneous elements in the discipline becomes difficult. This is true of macro theories and more true of micro theories. Commercialization and corporation of sociological research has made theory a matter of convenience in research. The finding agencies are not interested in theories as such; they want evidence based findings. This assumes importance since even the traditional finding agencies-government and research institutions have set their own research agenda and give funds only for earmarked theories. This means that a sociologist theoretician who wants to engage in research of his choice and to build up new theories will find little support for his endeavor from institutionalized funding agencies and even if he manages to do research on his own, his theoretical findings may have few takers.

Fragmentation of sociological knowledge by professional disciplines such as social work, business management, engineering and medicine, which need and use only parts of sociology for their research has made theory a dispensable item in their intellectual pursuits. In such circumstances, theory building is a luxury and even application of theory in research may not find favor with many intellectuals and professionals. If building new theory in sociology has been affected by internal factors, there are at least two major external factors that are threatening the validity of older theories. They are new trends in biotechnology on the one hand and information technology on the other. Genetic engineering has made possible human engineered organisms. Cloning and organ transplant may result in new species of mankind, which may not always behave in socially expected ways. Nano technology is developing fast and its capacity to implant or modify cells that would restore or accelerate intelligence will soon become a reality given the momentum gained in this field of research. Computer controlled human brain also could be seen as a possibility through remote.

There are many ways in which human behavior can be artificially maneuvered in the manner desired by the users. Given the incredible power of the new technologies, the question will be how to fit the existing theories of human and social behavior with the genetically engineered new brand of humans and the totally computerized human surrogates that will not only influence but may compel humans to alter and adjust their behavior vis-à-vis the new species. Biotechnology has reached a stage, which would alter the property of genes and through it, the very nature of human behavior, creating new problems for the social order. Human engineering, coupled with human cloning could fundamentally alter the physical and mental characteristics of the human being and this may challenge not only the accumulated knowledge and wisdom in sociology, but those in all human and social sciences.

Even apart from genetic engineering, psychologists are engaged in developing techniques to reformulate human behavior. Liberalization has contributed an economic dimension for destabilizing the existing social order. The unequal and unethical competition for capturing global Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) aided and abetted by their national governments has resulted in transforming the human being into a marketable commodity through aggressive sales promotion and manipulation of consumer behavior. Sociology will assume a new meaning when social man, the unit of its study is manipulated by human engineering and acts not according to established and commonly shared social norms and values that are geared to the needs of the MNCs.

Some examples of how social and family mores are being changed by biotechnology are as follows.

Son preference and large scale use of amniocentesis are tilting the sex ratio against women in many countries and the subsequent shortage of women in the marriage market mar result in wife-hunting and in the restoration of fraternal polyandry in society. Again, large-scale organ transplant has contributed to a booming racket in kidney transplant in metropolitan cities and with unethical international and tourist overtones (Feagin, 2001).

Yet, another threat to the established social order is Information Technology (IT). Its offshoot, Knowledge Revolution (KR) has become a major factor of profound significance in the new millennium and it has revolutionized society in a manner, which has no parallel in history. It has unfolded scenarios that have long standing implications for the mankind. What is more intriguing from the point of human society is that new information and knowledge are coming in such amazing abundance and with such terrific speed that no reasonable estimation of what all these would lead to in terms of the social order is beyond meaningful prediction or reasonable calculation.

The entry of nano technology in this field is another factor to be reckoned within the years to come as this would make most of man's present achievement redundant. Nano technology will have multiple effects on all sectors of human life and may lead to an entirely new social order of unpredictable nature and magnitude. Never before in the history of mankind has so much happened in society in such profoundness and within so little time.

Thanks to information technology, data is now transformed into information and information into knowledge. But there are two limiting factors here. Human mind will not be able to work as swiftly as the computer and so there is always a time lag between availability of knowledge and its application. Secondly, computer aided information, however, sharp and precise, cannot provide wisdom to select the most appropriate piece (s) of knowledge. Unless knowledge is converted into wisdom or applied wisely, application of knowledge to situations, however, sophisticated and apparently rational the knowledge is will be of no use. As wisdom varies from man to man, the advantage in the use of knowledge will be in the hands of those who possess superior wisdom. One can only say that those who control knowledge will also control wisdom. But one cannot say for certain that the knowledge will be used wisely by its possessors. The consequence of an unwise decision can at times be catastrophic and disastrous as some recent international decisions and courses of action based on them have shown.

THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES

Knowledge is power: Knowledge societies are arguably to be a source of human development and empowerment in that access to knowledge will IPSO facto contribute an element of power. UNESCO (2005) thinks that the revolution in new technologies and the new phase of globalization that accompanies it will add a new source to the third phase of industrial revolution. However, UNESCO's fond hope that this will strengthen peoples and countries all over the world does not seem to agree with reality. The fervent hope behind the UN declaration of human rights in 1948 is a case in point.

Knowledge Revolution (KR) assumes that knowledge societies will be able to enforce human rights with ease because with the availability of knowledge to everyone, things will become transparent and the fundamental rights of the individual will be known to everybody and will be enforced. However, studies have shown that the fact is otherwise and violation of human rights has continued even in highly developed knowledge societies. If at all, it has achieved anything, it is on the negative side; human rights violation has only increased after knowledge revolution. Large-scale violation of human rights in many parts of the world, under whatever excuses, has become a scandal even in UN circles.

Computer and Internet facilities are a sine qua non of knowledge societies: for knowledge storage and retrieval depend on these facilities. Here, UNESCO, which is itself a proponent of knowledge dissemination admits that this is a privilege, which is still in the hands of the countries of the North. According to UNESCO, only 11% of the world's population has access to the Internet. Ninety percent of people using Internet come from industrialized countries.

Indeed, while we speak of a global information society and of a world wide web, the fact is that 82% of the population account for only 10% of Internet connections in the world (Mlambo, 2006).

This digital divide is first and foremost a question of access to infrastructure. Some 2 billion people are not linked to an electricity grid the precondition of mass access to the new technologies. Furthermore, there is a problem of affordability. Computers are expensive. The provision of Internet services constitutes a very considerable investment in urban areas and is in short supply in the countryside. In addition, familiarizing oneself with the computer requires computer literacy, which is also unaffordable to the poor (UNESCO, 2005).

IMPACT OF THE NEW INVENTIONS AND DISORDERS

I have dwelt at length on computer and Internet, because they are the backbone of knowledge societies and they are a major factor in changing human behavior and social relationships. The high tide formed by new inventions and discoveries culminating in the knowledge society is going to sweep away part of man's innate characteristics in at least two directions the biological aspects will result in further changes contributing to perhaps an entirely new social order. Already, one of the outcomes of the knowledge society is the new cultural behavior patterns. A specific web culture is built up by a process of distribution in which there is a radically new cultural behavior patterns particularly as regards personal projection through the web pages (UNESCO, 2005). According to Castelles (2000), the society of the 21st century will be a network society. A fundamental feature of the social structure in the information age is its reliance on networks as the key feature of social morphology. While, networks are the forms of social organizations, they are now empowered by new information/ communication technologies so that they become able to cope at the same time with flexible decentralization and focused decision making.

Knowledge revolution is going to add to the stratification of society both within nations and between nations. At the global level, this will further strengthen those who presently control knowledge and to that extent bring a cleavage between the rich and poor nations. Within a nation, the gap between the rich who can afford the Internet and the poor who do not have access even to a telephone line is going to widen.

Knowledge is not innocent. The power that it gives to those who have access to it could be used for good or evil. Neo-colonial governments can use it to promote their hegemonies over weaker nations, terrorist groups can use it to streamline and sophisticate their anti-establishment activities. The more of knowledge, the more of its use in these directions. Let us come to a very homely example.

Many people believe that education will be the first social institution to be invaded by IT since, giant corporations know the big advantage that will await them if they make education as one of its major inputs. With the growing use of computers and commensurate change in the traditional mode of acquiring, storing and transmitting knowledge.

Computers CD-ROM and videotapes will increasingly replace school text books. There will be a radical transformation of the structure and dynamics of the of the school system and with it is the concept of the institution

of education. With the commercialization and marketing of educational institutions, the schools will be re-engineered in much the same way as business corporations and they will form part of gigantic multinational agencies, which will prepare the needed software for the new era education. The new technologies will not be adding to the curriculum, they will be transforming it if not replacing it completely. According to Giddens (2000), all traditional means of education will change with the growing use of computers and multimedia technologies in education. He warns that the effect of such invasion of educational field by the new technology will be reinforcing the already existing educational inequalities by adding a new category of information poverty to the material deprivation, which currently exists in a big way.

With the entry of IT and KR, a crisis has befallen the university. All orthodox grounds and the justification for the once elevated position either gone or considerably reduced, they now need to think and articulate anew their role in a world, which has no use for their traditional services, sets new rules for the game of prestige and influence and views with growing suspicion the values they stood for. Bulmer (1990), speaking of education in the post modern era, says that both the entire range of multimedia provisions of courses and subject materials and the pedagogy by which, these are meant to advance learning will be globalized and converted into broad banded multimedia technology. In the new setup, knowledge in computerized societies is becoming externalized from the knower in the new setup, education will be marketized and knowledge will be commoditized the offshoot of privatization, which is the offshoot of globalization. In this scheme of things, the teacher becomes redundant, the old books become redundant, old methodologies become redundant in fact, everything old becomes redundant. I made this elaboration on the impending change in education (a familiar ground for all of us) because you can easily visualize the changes that would come to the ontological, epistemological and metaphysical base of education in the years ahead.

According to Feagin (2001), there is a major impending threat to human beings from the new technology. This is the flooding of the labor market with robots. He quotes sun microsystems co-founder and chief scientist, Bill Joy that uncontrolled self-replication by robots with artificial intelligence could pose a serious threat to human beings in the coming decades. Computer scientists predict that by 2030, computers will be ever more human, conscious and intelligent. Computer capacity will be a million times greater then and computerized robots will be much smarter than human beings.

Given the incredible power of these new technologies, should we be asking how we can best coexist with them? According to Hakim (1998) in the process of changes of all sorts brought about by new technologies, our world is being re-made. In the new world, the identities, the sense of self, the subjectivities, all are being transformed.

CONCLUSION

The arguments that I tried to bring forth may be summed up as follows:

Information Technology (IT), the newest branch of technology has given birth to knowledge revolution and this in turn has created knowledge societies. Knowledge societies while, bringing many benefits of huge magnitude to mankind also offer new and serious threats to mankind because they can place at the disposal of everybody knowledge update on all fields of human endeavor that fundamentally affect human behavior and social relationship. The cumulative effects of all these is to create a new human being-social being-who may not always be guided by conventional values and normative social patterns. If this happens, the values enshrined in the social order and the norms and rules of behavior built on them will be transformed and this will result in the theories based on them becoming redundant.

While, the changes portrayed above may not happen immediately, it is likely that many of the elements of change will be experienced in the coming decades and by the end of the 21st century, especially with the entry of nano technology, things may take a faster turn. One thing seems to be certain, old values and norms are going to change but it is difficult to forecast the effects of info knowledge challenges on micro level man-to-man relationships and macro level social network relationships.

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