

The Ontology of the Present and the Tasks of a Future Sociology

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No one knows whether a new Parsons, Habermas or Luhmann will appear. The fact is that, in sociology, we no longer have a general theory of society capable of integrating the philosophical foundations (metatheory), the elaboration of a system of fundamental concepts (social theory) and a reflection on the structural transformations of modernity (sociological theory) into a single theory that would be at once general, systematic and historical. The time of Grand Theories seems to be over. Philosophers like Hans-Herbert Kögler continue to work out the foundations of a critical hermeneutics that would be capable of objectivating the social constraints that structure social practices without derogation of the lay actors' reflexive capabilities, but in sociology, at least in French and American sociology, theoretical work is hardly encouraged. It is enough to venture off the field to indulge in the pleasures of speculation, systematization or axiomatization to exclude oneself from the language game of sociology and to jeopardize one's career prospects.

While this chapter is written in homage to a German scholar who has worked at the intersection of critical theory and hermeneutics, I will mainly focus here on the discipline of sociology.¹ In the following pages, I would like to suggest a double shift. First, from the discipline of sociology to a new synthesis of the social sciences, philosophy and the new humanities and, second, from sociology's glorious past to the analysis of the present. What is important now is no longer to know what sociology is or does, but rather to try to interpret the events that are destroying societies around the world and pushing them toward the abyss, catastrophe and death. As Karl Mannheim, Theodor W. Adorno, and Talcott Parsons did in the interwar period, today, we must urgently revise and update our research agendas. Foreign colleagues (Russians, Indians, Turks, etc.) who, like me, live under an authoritarian regime (I live in Brazil) did not wait for the coronavirus pandemic to give lectures on current events. Against the background of a triple crisis—the crises of society, modernity and sociology (Macé 2020), I will propose the ontology of the present as an undisciplined reflection on the second postmodernity. In dialogue with Hans-Herbert Kögler, I will foreground questions of communication between disciplines, but also occasionally between the metropolis and former colonies.

Landscapes of Sociology

A new alliance between philosophy, the social sciences and the humanities is needed (Caillé and Vandenberghe 2021). As sociologists are not really interested in philosophy or in the human sciences, the latter two should perhaps take up the lead and propose a theoretically informed diagnosis of the age.² It is time again to join the analysis of the conjuncture to a critical analysis of social pathologies in a totalizing interpretation of the epoch. In sociology, theory no longer has a good press, though. It is considered too airy and too abstract. For sociologists, theory refers to a kind of synthetic reorganization of the themes that transcends the different points of view on a certain field of research (culture, class, consumption, social movements, etc.) one finds in the specialized literature of the various sub-disciplines of sociology (sociology of education, work, stratification, etc.). What is missing, it seems to me, is a rise to generality that does not so much try to reorganize the materials of research in a sociological theory of the middle range, but rather reorganizes and synthesizes these in a general theory of society.

The variation of scales of generality and the extension of the range of theorizing are important, because by varying the resolution of the different approaches to reality—moving from Google Street View to Google Earth, and back—we can not only maintain continuity between the transcendental and the empirical, the abstract and the concrete, the conceptual and the observational, but we can also more easily continue the dialogue between the sub-specialists and the generalists who are the guarantors of the unity of the discipline.³ The unity of the discipline also involves the rational reconstruction and ritual reinterpretation of the classics. In fact, this is their main function. If we return obsessively to Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, it is not because they have aged well, but because the obligatory references to their work makes it possible to put new wine in old bottles and old wine in new ones. It is thus by canonization and incorporation into the disciplinary corpus that sociology maintains its coherence and closes in on itself—like an autopoietic, self-referentially closed system of sorts.

The advantage of a general theory of society is that it is “overarching”—to reclaim a term that is used to disparage totalizing approaches. Like the belvedere, it allows to widen the horizon and to see the landscape in all its extent: the mountain ranges, the valleys, the rivers that are invisible from the lower observatories only become visible from the top. Of course, the lower lookouts also allow one to see part of the landscape, including from the upper observatory that observes them. I conceive of the theorist not as the creator of the universe, but rather as the painter who can move from one belvedere to another. The beautiful metaphor of the “landscapes of truth” (Löwy 1985) is convenient, but misleading, because social reality is not static, but dynamic. Nature is not dead, but alive. History has been set in motion again. Societies are in turmoil. Culture is contested. Individuals are politicized, polarized and hyperactive, even in lockdown.

What we need is a new dynamic synthesis, like the one Karl Mannheim (1936) proposed as an alternative to the philosophy of Marxist history. In this vision of a dynamic and synthetic sociology, the painter is an unattached intellectual who floats freely between disciplines to try to understand what is happening in the world, with

nature, with culture and with societies when there is no longer (or not yet) a philosophy of history. Mannheim is good example of a synthetic theorist. Coming from philosophy, his sociologies of culture, knowledge and education have incorporated the intellectual currents of his time, notably the hermeneutics of Dilthey, the phenomenology of Heidegger, the Marxism of Lukács, the sociologies of Weber and Simmel and the psychoanalysis of Freud, in a dynamic, open reflection on the existential determination of encompassing worldviews of the various social strata.

Contemporary sociology feels uncomfortable not only with theory and philosophy, but also with the spectacle of world politics and national news. Indeed, until recently, essays on the *Zeitgeist* and situational analyses were rather frowned upon—well received and welcomed as expressions of engaged citizenship, but not read as professional contributions in their own right. Interpretations of the “signature of the time” are best left, according to sociologists, to media philosophers, investigative journalists and other essayists who can speak out on a wide variety of subjects (terrorism, populism, epidemics) without discipline, data or fieldwork.

The success of “public sociology” (Burawoy 2005) does not contradict this observation, but confirms it. Successor to the critical Marxist sociology of the 1970s, it is indeed a heterodox and militant sociology, rooted in everyday life, that finds in sociology its conceptual resources to engage in the struggles of active minorities against domination, discrimination and exclusion. We see it at work in new journals, discussion forums, working groups, petitions and manifestos on a multiplicity of themes—from migrants’ rights to animal rights, from identity politics to police violence, from the critique of nanotechnologies to climate change (Durand 2019). Although public and critical sociology cannot and should not occupy the entire field of the discipline, I nevertheless believe that the critical situation of society transforms every professional into an intellectual, which does not mean an activist. Maintaining standards of academic rigor is essential for a sociology that seeks to interpret and explain current events. As Bourdieu (2002) once said, scholarship and commitment are not exclusive, but inclusive. While opening up sociology to neighboring disciplines and engaging in the public sphere, sociology must maintain its autonomy as a science to defend the values that are its own—communism, universalism, disinterestedness and organized skepticism (Merton 1973)—which are threatened both by the privatization of knowledge (markets) and the return of authoritarian regimes (states).

Sociology’s double malaise in relation to theory and the diagnosis of the age, its tense relationship with philosophy and journalism as “poles that should disappear from the field of a more scientifically demanding discipline” (Lahire 2002: 46, note 6) partly explain why the discipline finds itself overtaken on its borders. Nowadays, social theory is produced outside sociology. One finds it among post-Marxist philosophies (“critical theory” not so much in the municipal (Frankfurt) sense as in the ecumenical sense of the term) and also in Cultural Studies, including here specialties such as gender, media, and post-colonial studies, which break open the perspectives of old Europe by giving voice to the dominated minorities and the subaltern majorities.

Given the circumstances (the pandemic), the fluid conjuncture (populism), the geopolitical turbulence (the new cold war) and the planetary upheavals (climate change) that we are going through, one can think that, as in the 1960s and 1970s,

sociology will be more historical and political, more preoccupied with an analysis of the present than with an investigation of its philosophical presuppositions and conceptual coherence. It is doubtful that it will be in the vanguard of thought in the years to come. Not that it cannot contribute to the reflection on the ontology of the present, but less than ever, it will be able to do so by turning in on itself. Only if it sees itself as an integral part of the social sciences and opens itself toward its edges, only if it succeeds in resuming the dialogue with critical theory and the Studies, as well as with philosophy, will it be up to the task. It does not matter whether this reflection on the ontology of the present is done by sociologists, anthropologists, politicians, economists or philosophers; neither does it matter whether it is science or high-level journalism. In order to make sense of the present, one must open all the registers, transcend the disciplines and read widely.

Ontology of the Present

Sociology may well go the way of metaphysics, arts and social democracy. Its end has already been announced (Vandenberghé and Fuchs 2019). It may well be more productive, though, to redefine its ends and to reconceptualize its tasks within a larger interdisciplinary compound that takes the present as its object. To launch the debate, I propose the notion of ontology of the present and conceive it as a successor (*Aufhebung*) to the sociology of late modernity. I speak of ontology of the present not by presumption, but simply to indicate with Hegel the need for a collective, interdisciplinary and unattached reflection that tries to “seize its time in thought” (Hegel 1970: 26). This is not easy to do when history is in turmoil and no one knows what the future will bring.

We are confronted with a typical “Minerva problem.” As long as we are caught in the whirlwind of the present, we cannot interpret it. With the pandemic, we are finally coming out of the twentieth century. We know that an era has just ended. With the sudden resumption of events that puncture the continuum of history, epochal thought has also reached its limits. One might even think that any sociology of the future will necessarily be event-driven, which will not prevent it from analyzing historical trends, proposing diagnostic concepts (like “risk society”) or projecting the present into future social change (the digitalization of work and education). To the contrary. As a science of the present, anticipating future change in times of contingency, sociology will self-consciously continue its analytic, diagnostic, and therapeutic function. In its interpretation of current events, it will use social theory to extrapolate from the present and reorganize the data in a larger conceptual framework that tries to make sense of historical disjunctures.

Henceforth, sociology will have to give more attention to local events that directly attain the structure and have systemic significance. The problem of social order: “How is society possible?—or, equally Kantian: “What are the conditions of possibility for a relatively stable social order?”—is no longer on the agenda. The question as to “what keeps society together” has been displaced by the timely question “what drives it apart” (Heitmeyer 1997). We move from the problem of integration to that of social disintegration with its spectacle of economic precarity, political polarization, cultural

fragmentation, normative anomie and physical violence. Perhaps we should invert the reflection and start from the hypothesis of an original chaos that spreads throughout the world with ubiquitous pockets of relative order in an ocean of contingencies.

It may seem counter-intuitive to invoke the ontology of the present to indicate the instability and non-permanence of the world. Is ontology not the study of Being (*das Seyn*) rather than of beings (*das Seiende*) that are part of the ontic? On this point Portuguese and Spanish are more instructive than Heidegger's German. It has two verbs to designate two modalities of being: *ser*, which refers to what is permanent and intransitive, and *estar*, which refers to what is transitory, fugitive and transitive. The ontology of the present tense, as I understand it with Foucault (1984a, b), is an ontology of *estar*, of states of things that are in motion, that escape our control and befall us. In the Global South, the ontological difference is a situational and existential difference. The state of the world is never completely stable. Crisis is not the exception, but the rule. Society is not a thing, but an unstable correlation of moving forces. Institutions are not beings, but dynamic processes in a continuous process of reconstruction and destruction. Actors know that nothing is stable and that it is necessary to continually adapt and invent to survive. The force of the real finds its counterpoint in a nominalist vision of the world as a scatter of events that are not governed by God, reason or nature.

If I take the liberty of speaking, following Foucault, of an ontology of the present as a critical reflection on our "historical mode of being"—understanding "the events that have led us to become what we have become" so as open up "the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we what we are, do or think" (Foucault, 1984a: 574)—it is to recall that, in the end, it is indeed the social actors who make history, even if they do not make it in the circumstances they have chosen and even if it inevitably escapes them. Together, the order of things (truth), the analytics of power (norms) and the practices of the self (subject) configure a "historical ontology of ourselves in modernity" (Kögler 1994: 9) that is susceptible to change. We need a little optimism to think that underneath the rubble there are living forces just waiting to get history back on track.

The Studies

With the emergence of disciplines in the nineteenth century, the division of labor enters into thinking. While history continues to deal with the past without fragmenting as a discipline, anthropology and sociology divide time in much the same way that colonial powers divide space (Connell 2007). Anthropology will deal with peoples without history in the colonies, while sociology will study modern societies in the metropolis. As a reflexive "self-description" (Luhmann 1994: vol. II, chap. 5) of modern societies, sociology is coextensive with modernity. The reflexivity of the sociological discourse of modernity comes from the fact that this discourse, which takes over from the philosophical discourse of modernity, is itself modern, including in its critique of modernity. Normatively, sociology presupposes and pursues the philosophical project of the Enlightenment with its entangled notions of authenticity, justice and progress. If it occasionally introduces the hermeneutics of suspicion into the philosophical

discourse of modernity, it does it to better realize its ends. Conceived of from the onset as a normative and political project, its critique of society is immanent to society, which does not impede philosophers to seek to found the normative principles of critique in reason and to give them a transcendental foundation. From this hermeneutic perspective, sociology is indeed a science of reality, but it is also a science of the objective spirit that investigates the dynamic interconnection between the worldviews, the institutions and practices of an epoch that constitute society. The explanation of social structures that condition and, at times, limit the realization of the basic principles that define an age is thereby subordinated to the interpretation of the collective meaning structures that form the background of the interpretative practices of the social actors.

If I've learned anything from Kögler's critical hermeneutics and its incursions into Bourdieu's sociology (Kögler, 1997a and b) and Foucault's genealogy (Kögler, 1992 and 1996), it is that a critical theory of society needs to carefully parse its conceptual articulations between the social structure, culture and subjectivity, with culture being the mediator that connects the social conditions to the social practices. Without a solid concept of structure and social systems, social theory becomes idealistic and loses its critical edge (as is the case with the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer); without an adequate conception of culture and symbolism, it becomes mechanistic and deterministic (as is the case with Althusser, Bourdieu and Foucault); without a convincing theory of practices, social and cultural structures are reified into anonymous processes without subjects (as is the case with Horkheimer and Adorno).

Sociology is born with modernity and we can assume that it will disappear with it. It bears the marks of its origins in European societies shaken by the religious revolutions of the sixteenth century (Germany), the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth century (England), the political revolutions of the eighteenth century (France) and the industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century (England). Even though the first modernity developed on the Iberian Peninsula with the opening of the Atlantic Ocean and the discovery of the New World (Dussel 1993), sociology was not born in the sixteenth century in southern Europe, but in the nineteenth century in northern Europe.

Looking back at the history of sociology, we can distinguish at least five generations that have succeeded one another. Each generation was deeply marked by the events of its time: i) the "precursors" (Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx, who can also be seen as the first of the classics) who positioned themselves in relation to the revolutions of 1789 and 1848; ii) the "classics" (Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel) who lived through the *fin-de-siècle* and were shattered by the brutality of the First World War; iii) the "successors" (Talcott Parsons, Norbert Elias and Karl Mannheim) who experienced the rise of totalitarianism and the return to democracy in Europe; iv) the "contemporaries" (Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann and Anthony Giddens) of the world revolution of 1968, and then us, the "post-moderns" who are emerging from the twentieth century.

We did not become postmodern out of principle, but out of necessity. It is because we have quite suddenly shifted into a new epoch that we have come to accept the post-modernism(s) and poststructuralism(s) of yesteryear. Even though we may have

opposed at first the dissemination of French Theory (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze) and the proliferation of the Studies that were inspired by them, it must be said that with their insolent youth they have succeeded in capturing the *Zeitgeist* better than sociology, with which they share sensitivity for domination, exclusion and discrimination. For, in fact, although they are themselves symptoms of the crisis, the Studies have succeeded in introducing the crisis into philosophy, anthropology and the humanities. Where sociology was looking for society, they were directly linked to the new social movements and analyzed the production of culture and identities from the perspective of the interrelation of knowledge, power and resistance. In doing so, they forced the older disciplines to open up to current events and to renew critique beyond Marxism.

By pulling the rug from under the epistemic foundations of the disciplines, by showing their complicity with domination, by following new technological developments, by directly attacking societal problems and by speaking on behalf of active minorities, the new humanities have surpassed critical theory in their analyses and diagnoses of the ontology of the present (Kögler 2017). By deconstructing all the fundamental concepts of the old disciplines—the reason of the philosophers, the culture of the anthropologists, the text of the humanists, the society of the sociologists—the in(ter)disciplines have introduced plurality, fracture and disjunction into the discussion and put thought under tension. The Studies have entered the fields of philosophy (the critique of reason), anthropology (the study of cultures and communities) and sociology (the study of class and mass societies), and they've done so coming from the humanities. Thanks to a poststructuralist sensibility, they have been able to generalize the Marxist critique of exploitation to all forms of domination and broadened the spectrum of cultural analysis beyond class to race, caste, gender and sexuality. They have invaded the spaces of sociology and anthropology, criticizing their approaches, capturing their themes, but often without reciprocating. The result is the emergence of the in(ter) disciplines of the Studies with their own authors and their own journals that generally escape the eye of the sociologist and the philosopher. One need only look at the new journals and bibliographies of cultural, feminist and post-colonial studies to realize that they do not need sociology to speak about social and societal issues.

Why should sociologists accompany debates on gender, race, caste, sex, colonialism, etc.? Because students demand it and activists too? Yes, that is a good reason, especially when one is on the left and identifies with the critical and civic part of sociology. To answer this question satisfactorily, it would also be necessary to reverse the question and to show how the Studies could also benefit and learn from sociology. Here, as elsewhere, there is only one solution: listen, learn, read and teach, all this in the dialogical spirit that characterizes the hermeneutic encounter with the other that is at the very heart of all of Hans-Herbert Kögler's writings, from his first book on Gadamer, Foucault and Rorty to his later reflections on intercultural dialogue and self-identity. If we transpose the "ethos of hermeneutic dialogue" (Kögler 2007) from intercultural understanding to interdisciplinary communication, there's no reason to assume that understanding across and between the disciplines will necessarily fail. It is only by opening up our own understanding to the self-understanding of the other, that learning can occur through discussion, reading and writing. The self-understanding of the self thanks to the other transforms the self. Reciprocity is a mutual process of learning and

discovery that expands the limits of one's world and of one's self. One cannot read everything, of course, but neither can one close oneself off to everything and limit oneself to one's own discipline by claiming that the Studies don't do science, but radical politics; that in the name of the struggle against racism and patriarchy, they bring back essentialist conceptions of race and gender; that they proclaim an inverted anti-white, anti-Western racism and that victimhood, vindication and resentment should have no place in academia.⁴ So where does all this fear of the Studies come from? Why this violent rejection and all these diatribes against feminism, anti-racism and post-colonialism that one can see as the Studies are now arriving at last in France? Have we really learned nothing from Stuart Hall, Judith Butler or Achille Mbembe?

Take *Brutalism*, the latest book by the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (2020). He proposes a theory of the reification, demolition and carbonization of human bodies and criticizes the convergence of the instrumental and utilitarian reason of neoliberal government technologies, the electronic and digital reason of information capitalism and the biological and neurological reason of biotechnology in a *mathesis universalis* that erases the ontological distinction between living beings and machines, humans and things. To support his thesis of the artificial future of humanity in the new era of brutalism, which he analyzes from the vantage point of Africa, he discusses drones, bombs, refugee camps, mining, biotechnology, governmentality, animism and African masks with a perfectly updated bibliography on capitalism, the Anthropocene, populism, migration flows, torture, big data, etc. coming from a multiplicity of disciplines (philosophy, sociology, anthropology, geography, law, literature) and hybrid fields (technology and literature, agnotology and algorithms, architecture and archives). This is very much critical theory at the edge, not coming from Frankfurt though, but from the suburbs of Johannesburg.

As the Studies proliferated, their development was accelerated by a rapid succession of anti-paradigmatic "turns" (Bachmann-Medick 2016) that at first radicalized the linguistic and interpretative turns, but then increasingly opposed themselves to the linguistic turn, trying to revert to a pre-Kantian universe in which one would be able to access the "things in themselves" without any symbolic mediation. Whereas the Studies seek to go beyond the straitjacket of disciplines, the turns follow an artistic logic—it is necessary to be "absolutely modern," to innovate and to introduce each time a new revolution in the sciences that captures the attention and radicalizes the previous turn. In general, the turns take a theme (language, culture, practice, affects, etc.) and transform it into a perspective that transforms and transfigures reality. Since Richard Rorty's announcement of the linguistic turn in 1969, some sixty turns (and counting) have been proclaimed. We can distinguish four "moments" and as many "intellectual movements" that have attempted to disarticulate and revolutionize philosophy, anthropology and the human sciences: the linguistic and cultural turns (1960–70), the postmodern and poststructuralist turns (1970–80), the global and post-colonial turns (1990–2000) and, finally, the practical, ontological and speculative turns (2000–20).

As in the case of the Studies, it would be just as wrong to ignore them as to follow them all. The drift of the turns, twists, and returns is not uninteresting, however. Let us take as an example the "affective turn" (Vandenberghe 2017). Coming after the practice turn in contemporary theory, the affective turn is one more turn within the

poststructuralist movement that opposes the constructivism of cultural studies (all tendencies included) and challenges all forms of representation. Unlike emotions, which are culturally constructed, affects are visceral, infinitesimal and molecular. They are sensations and vital pulsations that pass through the body, yet escape consciousness. They are flows that are at once infraindividual, intimate and transpersonal. Like viruses, they are contagious, pass from one organism to another and, like fear and excitement, affect them collectively, making them act as a single super-organism. With its vitalism, panpsychism and animism, the affective turn joins the sensitivity of the new anthropologies and its descriptive metaphysics (Latour, Descola, Viveiros de Castro, etc.). The question for a hermeneutically inspired theory of practices is whether the affects can really be disconnected from all processes of representation and signification? Affects may be pre-conscious and infra-linguistic, but as we've learned from Heidegger, Scheler and Merleau-Ponty that does not mean that as intentional states of the body and pre-predicative moments of consciousness they cannot be brought into language or that they are not always already pre-formed at a deeper level by a practical (*Vorhabe*), visual (*Vorsicht*) and preconceptual (*Vorgriff*) background of interpretation (Kögler 1991: 70–8 and Kögler 2000). The relation between the body and the mind, the intention and the execution, the pre-predicative and the linguistic is not disjunctive. It is not a broken arc, but a dynamic circle that interrelates the elements of the continuum into living chiasm.

While anthropology has been hard hit by cultural studies and post-colonial critiques, it has emerged renewed and resourced (Comaroff 2010). Sociology for its part has not experienced any notable crisis since the 1970s. Certainly, it has gone through its chapel wars, and for a brief moment, it had some doubts about its “methodological nationalism,” but otherwise it has continued to professionalize while positioning itself more clearly on the left, not only on questions of class, gender, and race, but also on other themes such as the definition of populism, social welfare, animal rights, new forms of family, police violence, etc. (Durand 2019). Now the crisis is also affecting sociology; however, it is not an endogenous crisis. It is because societies worldwide have gone off the rails and are facing deep crises that sociology is also panicking. The upheavals of recent years are so radical; societies are in such a bad way and social change is so rapid that sociology is overwhelmed by current events and struggles to grasp the present with its concepts of the recent past. The gap between the experiences of the past that are crystallized into its concepts and theories on the one hand and the horizon of expectations that open up a future on the other has become a gaping chasm. To bridge it, sociology will need the assistance of the Studies. With their poststructuralist insistence on discontinuity, they are more sensitive to epochal ruptures.

The Second Postmodernity

It is true that as early as the 1980s, sociologists had taken the measure of the structural, cultural and technological transformations of their societies. They were well aware that their theories of the 1960s were no longer useful for thinking adequately about the societies at the turn of the century. In response to the theories of postmodernity, they

called for the development of a sociological theory of “late modernity” that would analyze in a more sober way the effects of the cultural, structural and societal changes that took place after 1968 and that tipped Western societies into a new phase of modernity, if not into a new type of civilization (Bonny 2004). With the crisis of 1973 and the election of Thatcher and Reagan, the conjunction of Fordism and Keynesianism of the post-war was slowly undone. The state began to retract in favor of the markets. The new information and communication technologies made their appearance. Henceforth, economies would be liberal, societies post-industrial, cultures post-modern and subjects highly individualized.

In the 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the controversy about postmodernism and postmodernity was relayed by the great globalization debate (Held et al., 1999). Initially, the debate centered on the economy (the deregulation of markets, the rise of transnational corporations, financialization), politics (the decline of the state, transnational connections, cosmopolitanism) and technology (information technology, the network society). Soon it expanded to encompass all dimensions of existence (law, culture, identity, subjectivity). The rise of emerging countries (the so-called Brics) subsequently challenged Eurocentrism and the evolutionism of inherited theories. Global Studies emerged as a specialized field of study with its own constantly updated bibliographies.⁵

In order to understand the state of the world, one must not only decenter and “deprovincialize,” one must also “undiscipline” oneself and open all disciplinary windows at the same time. Moreover, in the Global South, it is not so much a question of “deprovincializing” Euro-American metropolitan theories as of “reprovincializing” them. Reprovincialization implies that one tests them on terrains they could not foresee, confronts them with life worlds that reveal their limits, dismounts and remounts them in order to reterritorialize them. Let’s take just two examples to illustrate the conceptual challenges the social theorist faces in the postcolony. Foucault’s analysis of surveillance and prisons does not work in a context of violence that remains scarred by the experience of slavery. It’s true that unlike Habermas, Foucault has a few texts on colonization, but they are not sufficient to think through the colonization of the life-world in the strict sense of the term. Moreover, the problem of reification in developing countries is often compounded by the reverse problem of patrimonialism whereby the domestic sphere corrupts and corrodes the administrative and economic systems from within. And when a sanitary crisis comes on top of a political, economic and military crisis, the legitimation crisis of late fascism transforms the life world into a biopolitical world of death and denial (Vandenberghe 2020).

The critique of globalization and the emergence of a global civil society that contests the neoliberal hegemony suggested that another world would be possible. It was the time of the World Social Forum, the anti-globalization movement and a renewal of cosmopolitanism. Then, suddenly, in 2001, with the spectacular Al Qaeda attack in New York, the world tipped into violence. The Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen) was set ablaze as the Balkans had once been, unleashing a global civil war. In 2008, the subprime crisis exposed the fragility of the world economy. Neo-liberalism was ideologically delegitimized, but by imposing a policy of austerity, it became all the more operational. The election of Trump in 2016 came like a meteor that destabilized

the course of the world. National-populism progressed and the extreme right gradually established itself on every continent. Just as the urgency of an ecological transition imposed itself on everyone in the developed countries, the pandemic spread through the world, heralding new, more sober and darker times.

Our great theories of late modernity, post-Fordism and post-industrialism are valid only until 2000, at most until 2007. Not that they are false, but the analyses of Wallerstein, Habermas, Giddens, Beck, Castells, Boltanski et al. need to be updated, if not completely reformulated. To sharpen the mind, I propose to call the present era the “second postmodernity.” It emerges in the ruins of the first postmodernity. The latter was characterized by the radical questioning of the culture of modernity. Now it is the structures of the system that are collapsing in real time. With hindsight, we now understand that postmodernism was a swan song of the West and that the cracking of the cultural code of modernity was only the opening phase of a prolonged process of global systemic drift. This time the change is “real.” It is not only the culture of modernity that is fragmenting and diffracting. The second postmodernity means that the very structures of the global system are unraveling. Chaos can spread from the center to the periphery of the world-system, reorganizing geopolitics and unfolding from the economic and political subsystems to all spheres of social, cultural, and personal life. “The old is dying, the new cannot be born: during this interregnum we observe the most varied morbid phenomena” (Gramsci 1996: 283).

To this well-known quotation from Gramsci, we can add another equally classic one concerning the need to combine “the pessimism of the intellect” with “the optimism of the will” (the motto of the magazine *Ordine Nuovo* echoes the more romantic and mystical motto of Romain Rolland from whom Gramsci borrowed it). It is understood that it is necessary to keep the optimism of the intellect while avoiding the pessimism of the will. A lucid diagnosis of the ontology of the present is only possible if one allows oneself to think “without hope” and to act “with love.” It is because we know that there is a local solution that we can confront the global situation, which does not have one. As Bruno Latour (2015: 22) says about the ecological crisis, “we are not in a crisis. It’s not going to ‘pass.’ We’re going to have to get used to it. It is definitive.”

In order to grasp the ontology of the present, we must try to build a system of relatively stable and interconnected concepts that come from different disciplines and thematize, each in their own way, a critical problematic of the present at a level of generality that transcends the more specialized discussions of political economy, political science and ecology. The concepts chosen are neoliberalism, populism, and Anthropocene.⁶ These are not really concepts or analytical categories, but rather politically charged and expressively colored notions on which leftist intellectuals project, as in a Rorschach test, their anxieties and phantasms. One must take the three notions together and explore how the permutations can vary and form a system. The point of the exercise is twofold: on the one hand, to explore in conjunction the “great transformation” of neoliberalism (Polanyi 1957), the “great regression” of populism (Geiselberger 2017) and the “great acceleration” of the Anthropocene (Steffen et al., 2015) and, on the other hand, to analyze their interrelationships which, initially, are contingent, but which have ended up converging into a morbid syndrome.

It is therefore necessary to take them together without reductionism and without giving oneself the facilities of a Marxism that solves the equation (neoliberalism-capitalocene-fascism), but does not question itself. Neoliberalism and populism are interconnected. The anti-democratic liberalism of markets provokes the rejection of globalization and the adherence to illiberal democracy. Together, the markets and the populists who oppose them reinforce the entropic tendencies that lead to ecological catastrophe, the former by stimulating growth, consumption and international travel; the latter by denying the problem and supporting heavy industry and economic growth at any price.

For three centuries, societies have been trying to solve an equation with two terms: capitalism and democracy. We know that there is a tension, if not a real contradiction, between the two. The historical link between democracy and capitalism is contingent. It has been tied and untied many times before. Now, as in the interwar period, it is unraveling again, probably for the same reasons that Polanyi indicated in his analysis of the collapse of nineteenth-century civilization. It seems that capitalism can do without democracy, just as democracy can do without liberalism. The good news is that, officially, we are still in the Holocene. But the theme of the Anthropocene indicates that from now on there will no longer be two terms, but three: capitalism, democracy and sustainability (Jaiz 2020). One would like to believe that humanity only ever poses itself the problems it can solve, but when it is humanity itself that poses the problem, one must step back and reflect how one could possibly rebuild the social sciences, societies and technology with the help of the humanities and philosophy.

Notes

- 1 Some of the ideas of this chapter find their origin in a doctoral seminar “Ontology of the Present: Neoliberalism, Anthropocene, Populism” which I taught at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in 2019. The collapse of Brazil under the extreme right government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro forms the background of my reflections on the past, present and future of sociology. An earlier version of this text was written in French and published in the *Revue du Mauss*, 2020, no. 56. I thank L’ubomír Dunaj and Kurt Mertel for their encouragement and insistence.
- 2 *Zeitdiagnose* is a typically German genre at the intersection of the social sciences and the humanities that addresses itself to the general public to critically interpret the signature of the epoch. See Lichtblau, 2017 for a general overview of the genre, from Georg Simmel and Hans Freyer to Ulrich Beck. For a more systemic approach that brilliantly theorizes the reflexive relation between sociology and the diagnostic self-descriptions of society, see Nassehi 2001.
- 3 The notion of the variations of generality has been obtained through a fusion of the “variations of scale” of the micro-historians (Revel 1996) with the rise to generality of the French pragmatists (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991).
- 4 Post-colonial studies may have arrived in France with a delay of quarter of a century, its rejection has been rather swift, visceral and irrational. For a coordinated attack by leftwing republicans on the identity politics of race, see the Observatory of decolonialism and identitarian ideologies (<http://decolonialisme.fr>) and the spirited reply by Mbembe (2020).

- 5 Global Studies are not part of Cultural Studies, although research on pop and post culture in different parts of the world may be included. Global Studies is concerned with “world governance” at the transnational level and is situated at the intersection of international relations, international political economy, international law and area studies. Critical Global Studies deals with the same issues, but from a Third World perspective that explores the contradictions of global capitalism and the alternatives that come from the South.
- 6 They are not concepts, but folders in which a large quantity of texts on the main current topics are arranged to guide the discussion. The approach should be further broadened to include geopolitics, international relations and the new technologies of warfare, the new information and communication technologies of digital capitalism and the political psychology of the new “authoritarian personality.”

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