Change and social forms

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Abstract

The social structure is constantly changing. While striving to study society, it is therefore clear that sociology has to identify, highlight and embrace the fundamental concepts, the conceptual categories that make it possible to become familiar with, understand, interpret and explain events. However, if the analysis of social transformations can reveal a common denominator that appears to be the characteristic interpretative key for each society, does it mean that there is a common underlying structure at the root of every change?

After the existence of a common principle (form) or a common denominator for every society and historical-social period has been established, we need to ask if this common denominator contributes towards the organisation of social phenomena (*first perspective*) or whether it is an interpretive category, an analytical grid that the subject applies in his knowledge of society (*second perspective*). Does the subject give form to society through specific interpretive categories (Panofsky), or is society generated and modified by a formal social structure (Goldmann)?
Keywords: social change, social forms, genetic structuralism

1. The postmodern social fracture

Using Ceserani's three guideline criteria (1997), the conditions that define an epochal change are:

1. the simultaneous occurrence of a phenomenon in different areas, manifesting itself on an increasingly frequent basis;
2. the existence of a phenomenon in different sectors of social life and in different structures of the imaginary and communication;
3. the ability to interpret different phenomena in a hierarchical way (it would not be possible to explain one phenomenon unless another one existed) from a material level to a level more closely connected to the cultural field;

The birth of modernity is generally considered to be an important moment of epochal transformation[1].

On the other hand, a debate is still in progress about whether a subsequent considerable change existed between the 1950s and 1960s, defined by the term *postmodern.*

The term *postmodern*[2] (*postmodernism*) is used to identify the set of changes that occurred after the second industrial revolution and the birth of positivism, which were characterised by fragmentary social and cultural processes and which sometimes contrasted with each other. It is seen as an attempt to think about the present in a historical way in an age that first and foremost has forgotten how to think historically. Modernism also considered the New in a compulsive manner

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[1] Marked by the birth of reproductive logic with the industrial revolution.
[2] The term postmodern started to be used at the beginning of the nineteen seventies (Ceserani, 1997). It was first coined by morphological historiographer Arnold J. Toynbee to refer to the period which started in 1875 (Rifkin, 2000).

and tried to analyse its birth, but postmodernism seeks out fractures and events rather than new worlds, revelatory moments after which nothing remains as it was before. (Jameson, 1991)[3].

Rationality and the rigid Enlightenment now appear to be limited tools for dealing with unpredictable and rapid cultural, social and economic transformation; the all-inclusive *ratio* of the system has now been neutralised by a new form of irrationality which has torn up traditional links and points of reference, supported by desire, enchantment and pleasure (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947).

In general, stability, linearity and rationality are replaced by an increasing level of uncertainty due to greater complexity and speed in the transmission of information and technological evolution. The result is a strong level of instability and a new cyclical articulation of time, which breaks away from the idea of progress.

Tab. 1 gives a brief overview[4] of the main distinctive features of postmodern society.

Tab. 1 – Modernity vs. Postmodernity

Modernity	Postmodernity
Rationality and science	*Unnatural and experimentation*
Functionality and order, love of reason and science	**Love of the unnatural, the subconscious and experimentation**
Rational logic	*Implosion of signifier-signified*
Path characterised by ambivalent interplay	**Continuous mirroring interplay. Loss of referent (aura)**
Profundity	*Appearance*
Search for the truth	**New supremacy of appearance**
High and low culture	*Mass culture*
Separation art-everyday life	**Commodification of culture, aestheticisation of daily life**
Recollection and progress	*Present*
Memory of the past, actions geared towards future and progress	**The present must be coped with, which is past and future.**

This transformation is still the subject of different interpretations and studies aimed at understanding the changes in question. It is difficult, however, to provide an overview that includes the perspectives of all those authors who have put forward theories. Instead, we shall examine just a few of them. (Tab. 2)

Tab. 2. – Postmodernity and theories

CHANGES	PERSPECTIVE	AUTHORS
Industrial revolution, technological development	*post-industrial society*	Bell (1973) Polany (1944)
Knowledge Cognition	*information society*	Lyotard (1979) Naisbitt (1982) Toffler (1980) Stoiner (1983) Brzezinski (1971) Masuda (1981)
Work: flexible specialisation	*post-Fordism*	Piore-Sabel (1982) Lash and Urry (1987; 1994)
Individual aestheticisation of daily life	*narcissistic society*	Lash (1979; 1990) Featherstone (1991) Lipovetsky (1983)

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[3] Some authors do not consider these changes to be important or profound enough to identify a precise historical and cultural moment different from modernity. These include Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994), who claim that social transformations in progress can be reconnected to a process of *modernisation of modernity*, defined as reflexive modernisation, in which the structure of industrial societies are subjected to a further modernization process which transforms them and revises them radically.

[4] It should be underlined that the intention here is not to be exhaustive. The author is aware of the difficulty of trying to interpret different perspectives by means of a *simple* table.

2. Social change and the theory of structural homology

The social structure is constantly changing. It is not possible to establish fixed evergreen pivotal principles that define a social context, as every society is the result and the cause of ongoing change.

The close indissoluble relationship between culture and society has focused its attention on social structures and symbolic orders, like the objectification of intersubjective sedimentation, subjective experiences which stabilise and are shared by other subjects (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The processes of change that characterise social structure and symbolic orders are interdependent, since a change in the former sector causes transformation in the latter and vice versa.

While striving to study society, it is therefore clear that sociology has to identify, highlight and embrace the fundamental concepts, the conceptual categories that make it possible to become familiar with, understand, interpret and explain events.

If the object of study evolves and changes in terms of its structure, cultural products and resulting relationship dynamics, a different study paradigm is needed, offering a perspective which takes account of new interpretive categories that can be used to explain social changes and transformations.

2.1 Postmodernity…through the simulacrum

Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) claimed that 'nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the "outside" is the real source of fear'.

If the purpose of enlightened thought was to free the world from magic and the imaginary, the relativism and imperfection that characterise postmodernity prompt us to look for new interpretative keys for this cultural model.

According to Jameson (1991), at the dawn of capitalism and bourgeois society there was something called a sign, which appeared to maintain relations with its referent without any problems. The sign flourished as the result of the corrosive break-up of the old forms of magical language by a force that the author calls reification. He claims that the latter is now so distant from the sign that it has given rise to a level of autonomy with a relatively free utopian existence compared to that experienced by its former objects.

While semiotics traditionally takes shape in a model with signified, signifier and referent, in which the three components play separate autonomous roles and which Lash (1990) associates with a "regime of signification" which is "discursive" in nature[5], postmodern logic demolishes this relationship.

With regard to the epistemological overtaking between concepts and their referents and in contrast to classic structuralists, Derrida emphasises the instability of the signified and the endless intertextual interplay between signifieds, due to the instability of the signifier (referent). As a result of the mix between real and virtual, most of our experiences have little to do with reality; the real is disappearing in a flood of simulation.

This underlines the problem of interpretation and brings us back to the issue of the referent and its relationship with the signified. The end of the signifier-signified relationship leaves room for multiple interpretations: the real is now intrinsically ambiguous and is consequently the subject of a number of disputes at the level of signifieds. The real is thus seen as being in crisis, meaning the

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[5] According to Lash (1990) this regime of signification:
  1.   favours words over images;
  2.   values the formal qualities of cultural objects;
  3.   offers a rationalist concept of culture;
  4.   maintains that the meanings of cultural texts are fundamental;
  5.   is a sensibility of the ego and not of the id*;*
  6.   operates by distancing the spectator from the cultural object.

(real!) circumstance whereby whatever we see and feel, the essence of our personal experience, offers itself to a baffling variety of interpretations (Carmagnola, 2002).

Therefore, with regard to the logic of the modern age, where the starting point for developing thought was the principle of contrast, there is now continuous mirroring interplay. There is no longer a clear and distinct contrast between differences, but rather constant cross-referencing from one aspect to another.

A new aesthetics has come into being, an aesthetics of allegory, illusion and anamorphosis (Mazzocut-Mis and Franzini, 2003).

What new logic can be used to interpret this social change?

According to Di Paola (1980), Simulation occupies a special place in the modelling of complex social systems. The age of simulation does not begin with the elimination of all referents but with them being artificially resurrected in a system of signs. In terms of meaning they become a more pliable material, as they lend themselves to any system of equivalence.

Contradiction appears like the non-identical with regard to identity, a sign of the untruth of identity. Rejecting identity as an absolute truth and thereby admitting the possibility that the non-conceptual exists in the concept implies a dialectic that can question the different claims of identity between reason and reality and which reveals existing contradictions.

Everything becomes indeterminate and inexpressible, everything is the result of an undefined process of transit and a defined process of implosion whereby one phenomenon merges into another and two previously dichotomous poles blend together.

The dialectics of the simulacrum therefore enables us to understand any social phenomenon that lies inside the contrasts that characterise our society, because it follows the movement and constant proliferation of pairings that nullify their origins.

While this new social form models society in accordance with well-defined characteristics and dimensions, making its content abstract, structural[6] homology[7], the product of the dialectics of the simulacrum that characterizes these different phenomena, makes it possible to compare them.

3. Social forms and change

Three different phases can be identified in historical-social evolution: ancient society (feudalism), modernity and postmodernity. Each of these is characterised by a fundamental principle around which many social phenomena are organised and structured and may also be explained.

However, if the analysis of social transformations can reveal a common denominator that appears to be the characteristic interpretative key for each society, does it mean that there is a common underlying structure at the root of every change?

One necessary premise is to analyse the term formalism (from the Greek word *morphe* = form), indicating any philosophical attitude that takes the formal aspects of reality as the principle for its arguments[8]. More specifically, in aesthetics formalism indicates the theory whereby the value of a work of art is determined by its formal aspects (colours, style, etc.).

After the existence of a common principle (form) or a common denominator for every society and historical-social period has been established, we need to ask if this common denominator

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[6] This refers to the concept of structure inherited from structuralism, which depicts the system of relationships that make up reality. Structure is the set of relationships based on normative symbolic mediation; it consists of parts that are independent but interconnected by relations of subordination. According to Lévi-Strauss, structure is not simply the manifest system formed by cohesion between its parts, but rather the internal order of the system and the set of possible transformations that characterise it. Structure does not identify with the superficial aspect of systems, with its manifestation, but with the logical organisation that subtends these systems.

[7] The term homology indicates a relationship between two or more parts which are different but have an underlying similarity, an original common form. While an analogy is a direct likeness between any objects, a homology shows that what *presented* itself, or usually presents itself, as separate is really genetically united (Rossi-Landi, 1985).

[8] Unlike logicism, a perspective according to which reality can be traced back to a logical system so that every single aspect of it can be mathematised through a symbol-mathematical reduction of events.

contributes towards the organisation of social phenomena (*first perspective*) or whether it is an interpretive category, an analytical grid that the subject applies in his knowledge of society (*second perspective*).

This is a perspective based on a very precise choice: to establish whether there is a characteristic social form at the root of society that organises events and *in-forms* them on the basis of these principles, or whether these common aspects emerge because subjects apply these forms and cognitive categories to social phenomena[9]. (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – *Form – society and the individual*
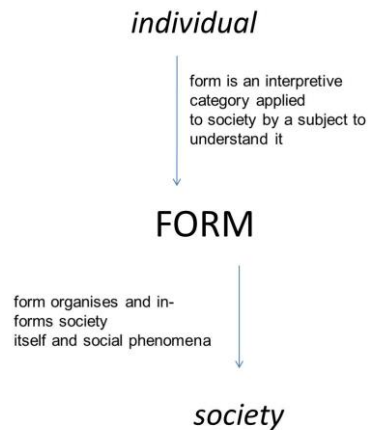
As far as the first perspective is concerned, Goldmann's view is at the forefront, taking its structural cues the works of György Lukacs and the thinking of Lévi-Strauss. The second point of view draws on a study by Panofsky (1927) and features approaches that place the subject at the centre, defining "formism" as a cognitive tool that applies the individual to the social context. Examples of these are the studies by Michel Maffesoli. (Fig. 2)

It is important to point out that in both cases the relevant reflections derive from studies pertaining to art and aesthetics, a trend that prompts us to start by analysing the concept of form from an artistic point of view.

Fig. 2 – *Form – society and the individual: perspective and authors*

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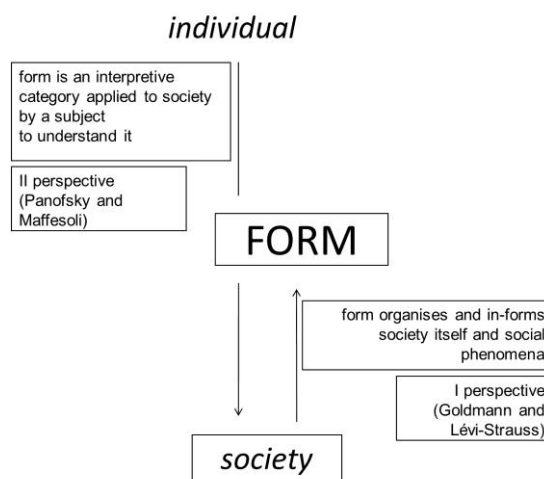
[9] While admitting, as this work will go on to confirm, that this is one of the basic problems of sociology, as the holistic perspective, which focuses on society, has always contrasted with the individualist scenario, where the figure of the individual and his actions plays a central role.

3.1 Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism: form organises society.

Lucien Goldmann's perspective focuses its attention on the cognitive processes used to approach reality, an orientation which not only sees sociology conditioned by the situation but which must also take into account the historical and social characteristics of the subject.

As previously mentioned, Goldmann developed his theory from works by Lukacs[10], *Die Seele und die Formen*[11] (1911) and *Die Theorie des Romans* (1916 and 1920), texts which emphasised that all expressions of cultural reality are the product of a human soul that demonstrates its wide range of different opportunities through coherent forms or structures. According to Goldmann, however, Lukacs's methodology omits the origin of form and these coherent structures at this stage of his analysis[12].

Lukacs's position can be summarised in three main statements:
- man is a historical being that tends to give his life meaning;
- history, like human creation, is meaningful and assumes the validity of the category of progress;
- coherent forms of spiritual creation naturally constitute privileged forms of an activity within which coherence is one of the main value criteria.

Here Lukacs's thinking approaches Goldmann's position through the dialectical conception of totality, which, as Tombolato states (1982), dissolves the dualism between part and whole, the dualism between individual and society and all similar or related dualisms.

Indeed, Goldmann claims that the perfect adequacy of form to content does exist. Social life is both a place and a condition so that experience can occur by transforming amorphous data or matter into something with form through general principles or categorical forms, which are neither rigid nor eternal, but vary in keeping with changes in social structure.

Goldmann's reasoning started from an analysis of the relationship between social context and art, which according to the author lies in a homology of structures and not in an identity of content. Indeed, Goldmann's genetic structuralism[13] is the prerequisite for the existence of a collective conscience, the concrete cultural expression of society.

In agreement with Piaget, Goldmann sees structure as a coherent organised set of interdependent constituent elements, a group of elements united in a totality, where the properties of the elements depend wholly or partly on the character of the totality. It is not possible to establish the beginning of this totality-structure correlation; the real cannot be defined according to objective/subjective and natural/ideal dichotomies, as it is *simply historical*, or rather objective/subjective, natural/ideal and physical/socio-cultural at the same time. Totality and structure are the result of history and the relationship between structures is itself a process of ongoing structuring and deconstruction.

As historical becoming develops, the universal nature of the truths that fuel it becomes increasingly evident.

Humanism, capitalism, socialism, etc. are universal conceptual terms, whose content derives from the concrete reality which they refer to. As there is a close correlation between economics, society and culture, periodising history also implies the periodisation of culture in general. Individualism, contract, universality, equality, tolerance, freedom and property are the values that constitute the essence of western humanism and the principles implicated in a market economy. This means that as far as we can learn from history there is a real connection between the existence of a market economy and the existence and safeguarding of the aforementioned values.

This explains the close relationship that according to Goldmann links structure to history and the becoming of history.

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[10] His teacher.

[11] This is a collection of essays in which Lukács aims to identify the essence of certain forms of human behaviour, linking them to literary forms in which the conflicts of life are expressed.

[12] Lukacs rectifies this omission in another of his works, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein. Studien über marxistische Dialektik* (1923).

[13] It is important to underline that this is nothing to do with the methodology that deals with the study of linguistics and semiology developed by Saussure and Greimas.

As Tombolato writes (1982), in the age of liberal capitalism the idea of totality disappears from the conscience; everyday thought, economic activity, sociology and philosophy show that they are not structurally oriented towards the collective social life but the individual. *Homo economicus,* the Cartesian ego, the autonomy of individual conscience, reason, perception and heroes are the elements that stand out in different fields (economics, philosophy, literature).

Can other major forms of historical-social periodisation be explained through this perspective? What structures can be recognised?

3.2 Erwin Panofsky: the interpretive categories of the subject.

A different approach sees forms and formism as necessary tools applied by the subject to learn more about society.

This point of view originated from Erwin Panofsky's studies on the concept of perspective and symbolic form[14], a form whereby a peculiar spiritual content is connected to a concrete perceptible sign and closely identified with it.

Panofsky draws on the work of Alois Riegl, in particular the latter's attempt to establish relations of interdependence between figurative and spatial experience and the feeling of life that dominates a specific historical-social period. For example, Riegl claims that while in ancient art the artist considered objects as separate individual forms, independent on an ideal flat background, the use of perspective in modernity is in keeping with the subjective integration of experienced reality.

Compared to Riegl's position, Panofsky's thinking focuses on the relationship between physiological perception and its representation in terms of perspective.

To be precise, while Antiquity was characterised by an objectivist notion of reality that presupposes a vision of absolute symmetry and frontality and that considers individual forms separately on a flat background[15], the Middle Ages tried to assemble what had previously been configured as a variety of individual elements into a real unit. Compared to modern depiction methods, the ancient technique was characterised by a peculiar indeterminateness and a profound lack of consequentiality. By contrast, modern constructions based on the vanishing point modify the values of width, height and depth in a constant ratio, thereby clearly establishing the right dimensions for each object and the position that it assumes with respect to the eye, something which is impossible in the system with vanishing axes[16], where the layout of radii has no validity.

Since Antiquity there have been two diverse concepts of the order of spatiality, which have influenced different perspective-related solutions: the discontinuous perspective of ancient objectivism and the infinite homogeneous perspective of modern perspective.[17]

The use of linear perspective in modern art started because it constitutes a subjective integration of experienced reality. According to Panofsky the use of the technique of perspective depends on the prevalence of the subjective integration of experienced reality in the modern age. Modern art makes the subject's vision of space concrete, so that if space is now subjective, the central point of view will be that of the subject himself.

Panofsky's approach therefore highlights the close existing relationship between social context and the interpretation thereof. The author claims that a subject applies his own interpretive categories in order to understand reality. For this reason, ancient perspective is the expression of a characteristic perception of space that is fundamentally different from its modern counterpart; it is thus the expression of a vision of the world that is just as specific and distant from the modern one (Panofsky, 1927).

This leads to a new feeling of space, which in turn creates a new rational concept of space that encompasses all spiritual activity.

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[14] For Cassirer symbolic form is all energy of the spirit through which a spiritual content endowed with meaning is linked to a sensible sign and closely attributed to it.

[15] When ancient art introduces the idea of space, it becomes unreal and imaginary (Panofsky, 1966).

[16] The ancient depiction.

[17] According to Panofsky this stopped in the twentieth century with the formulation of the theory of relativity, which provided a new rational concept of space.

The concept of constructed space put forward by Panofsky is of general interest, as it means that the space of perception, which obviously depends on the spectator's point of view, is no longer given but constructed by those watching. For this reason, each place has its own distinctive features and value.

4. Form and society

When the two different perspectives are analysed, two paradigms emerge that do little to solve an issue that has always been an element of sociological debate: the relationship between subject and society.

The traditional debate over which of the two components (subject or society) has supremacy over the other[18] is also a fundamental feature of the analysis of the two perspectives presented here.

The same debate can be encountered in this case too by analysing the concept of form: does the subject give form to society through specific interpretive categories (Panofsky), or is society generated and modified by a formal social structure (Goldmann)?

In my opinion the most interesting perspective is Goldmann's genetic structuring theory, according to which social change is the result of a formal structure that has the same properties and characteristics as society, as it is both a consequence and a *cause* of this form.

If, as previously mentioned, the current postmodern society can be interpreted and explained by using the concept of simulacrum, so that the characteristic dimensions of this concept (Viviani, 2008) can be recognized in many social phenomena, which other forms are highlighted by the study of social change?

Feudal, modern and postmodern societies are characterised by specific well-defined principles, but which basic structure do they correspond to? Starting from the presumption that postmodernity can be explained through form-simulacrum, which other forms emerge from the analysis of other historical-social contexts?

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[18] Which led to the birth of holism (Durkheim), in which the social dimension plays a central role, and individualism (Weber), where the role and position of the individual is of prime importance.

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