A Thematization of the Postmodern Situation
——Sociological Theory in a New Key*

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Abstract

The flourish and decline of the Roman Empire is still the most eloquent metaphor so as to discuss a macro scale transformation of our civilization.

A thematization of the postmodern situation as a key conceptualization for an adequate grasp of the ongoing societal transformation at the end of the twentieth century exactly concerns itself with the above-mentioned metaphor of the Roman Empire and really is a macro scale matter.

The thesis of this paper suggests that modern societies or modern society since the era of René Descartes and sharply sculptured by a series of the Industrial Revolution all over the world has been increasingly leaving itself behind in three domains, namely in the scientific, in the everyday life and in the international relation.

The present-day society or contemporary view of societies, then, should be defined in a movement of distracting modernity or the modern situation in our terms, so in the postmodern situation. This paper deals with, firstly, the origin of the postmodern situation (Ⅰ); secondly the birth of the philosophical postmodern situation (Ⅱ); thirdly the scheme of the postmodern situation (Ⅲ); fourthly the Eight theses of the End of Modernity (Ⅳ) and lastly the new key in sociological theory corresponding to this great transformation (Ⅴ).

I. History of the postmodern situation

The postmodern situation defined as a societal situation caused of an outward attracting power from modernity could be traced to until the end of 1960s, or generally to the sixties. In those days, on one hand in the West, especially in occidental Europe, the process of decolonization produced a novel tendency of reflections on modernist oriented European thought such as the birth of structuralism and of neomarxism. On the other hand in the East, oriental Europe, the process of democratization coupled with that of nationalization had proceeded itself since 1956 on way of 1968 and 1970 or the like years.

These two different movements observed in the two divided Europes eloquently point out to the origins of a set of the present-day popular sociological discussions, namely the thesis of globalization and that of localization.

II. Naissance of a postmodern trend as philosophical postmodernism

1. First things first, a typically postmodernist school called Collège International de Philosophie (the Parisian School of Philosophical postmodernism) should be mentioned. This Parisian School is viewed as an amalgam of poststructuralism and postmarxism, taking a lot of inspiration from their four masters, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche. This is an international school such as the Frankfurt School born in the 1920s Germany, this time in the postwar France.

2. One can define this ensemble of thought as the intellectual postmodern situation. In 1980s in

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Northern America, this intellectual orientation become dominant especially in the world of literary criticism. About since 1989 this complexity of thinking has had its representatives in the field of social and sociological theory. The intellectual postmodern situation on a societal level is an amalgam of neoconservative thought on one part (Daniel Bell, Amitai Etzioni and Francis Fukuyama and others), and the postcommunistic or postmarxistic on the other (Zygmunt Bauman, Shoji Ishitsuka and others).

II. Scheme of the postmodern situation

One can show on the below the triple structure of postmodern situation from its phases via its causes to its themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3 phases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>① intellectual</td>
<td>① autoreflection of occidental modernization</td>
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<tr>
<td>② everyday</td>
<td>② consumerization and informatization</td>
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<td>③ international</td>
<td>③ fall of real socialism</td>
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<th>3 themes</th>
<th>3 themes</th>
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<td>social</td>
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<td>① feminism</td>
<td>① desire</td>
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<td>② ethnicity</td>
<td>② other</td>
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<td>③ ecology</td>
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Ⅳ. Eight theses on the end of modernity

[The 1st thesis]
Who is I when one says, “Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am)”? The standpoint of “Modern Universalism” which considers it as nothing but “humanity” in general should be in ruin, foremost by the fact that the very human is Descartes himself, man, not woman and the self, not the other. Therefore, the evidence of the other should be put on the central question, not that of the self.

[The 2nd thesis]
“Modernity” or “Modern Universalism” is nothing but an ideological being or an ideal existence. Accordingly, the very question toward what's indicated by it should be started to raise in the most radical way.

[The 3rd thesis]
Defining fundamentally today’s world is neither “modernity” nor “Modern Universalism”. It is the other of reason, and the other of civilization. Therefore, the very question toward desires or the human nature, nature or the objective nature should be started to put in the most radical fashion.

[The 4th thesis]
Today's world can be defined globally as well as locally by the three situational categories: the “Ultramodern situation”, the “Modern situation” and the “Postmodern situation”. And one can develop these three situational categories in the three phases such as the intellectual, everyday and international ones.

[The 5th thesis]
The intellectual postmodern situation flourishes itself in the center of the European Civilization, in France, and this tendency as an integration of the artistic, the philosophical and the socio-theoretical postmodern situation is spreading all over the world. This is a movement of the autocritique of the European Civilization.

[The 6th thesis]
The everyday postmodern situation develops itself in the periphery of the European Civilization, namely in America, Canada and Japan, spreading all over the world. This world-wide becoming tendency has been caused by the highly densed information and consumption.

[The 7th thesis]
The international postmodern situation has been taken place by one of the most astonishing events in human history, the fall of real socialism. This event has made decisive in world history the present situation of “the end of modernity”, or the postmodern situation.
[The 8th thesis]

The basic categories in an age of the re-judgement of Modern Universalism, namely in an era of the end of modernity, in which we share living today, are “desire”, “the other”, “nature”, and “feminism”, “ethnicity”, “ecology”. These triple categories are most decisive in today's world.

V. Conclusion: Sociological Theory in A New Key

—A Thematization of the Postmodern Situation

[Part 1]

A. Social Mutations on Three Levels

One can almost exactly trace a completely new situation, the postmodern situation especially on its everyday phase up until 1968 or the years around it, namely the world-wide event and societal transformation of the so-called, “Worldly simultaneous student revolt”. Since the end of those sixties, the postmodern situation has been increasingly developed, coupling itself with the electronic revolution and the postfordistic or Toyotistic production. The electronic revolution has brought with it an information society, while the postfordistic or Toyotistic production has made up an image of consumer society.

This increasing postmodern situation is characterized on the three levels, economic, cultural and social. On the first level of economy, in the postmodern situation the image of work has been drastically shifted to that of a service-oriented one. As a result, the activity of a whole economy is expressed just by a symbolic movement of money, stock and a financial balance sheet. So, compared with the modern situation whose economy is still in essence so national or local, the economy in the postmodern situation has taken on its globalized character. On the second level of culture, the substantial and visible character of value in the modern situation has transformed into the insubstantial and invisible one in the postmodern situation. This drastic change in cultural value corresponds to that in economy and work just discussed on the above. As in the modern situation, production-guided economy produces a visible and substantial relation between work activity or creation and its result or product. In the postmodern situation, however, consumption-guided economy makes human concerns exclusively upon its end results or products in themselves. In other words, in the postmodern situation, coupled with the overwhole use of information technology in every sector of economic activity, the purely exchange-value character of work, product and money has been wholly dominant.

On the third level of society, in the postmodern situation, as a result of the above-discussed transformations in economy and culture, the (wo)man to (wo)man relation has suffered a great change.

The human relations become highly invisible and insubstantial in that, to a greater extent, one only deals with images or somethings-about, non real things themselves. This very peculiar condition or societal context of the insubstantiation of human relationship has so far been mentioned and discussed by the four authors, György Lukács (The Ontology of Social Being, 1964-71), Norbert Elias (What is Sociology?, 1970), Zygmunt Bauman (Modernity and the Holocaust, 1989, 1991
enlarged version) and Shoji Ishitsuka (*Socio-philosophical Inquiries into the Present-Day Civil Society*, 1995).

**B. Power and Manipulation**

Along with the rise of a new societal situation named *the postmodern situation*, which we have so far repeatedly explicated, the political domain of the present-day civil society has also undergone a drastic change, especially concerning the image of power. Still in *the modern situation*, in the process of Western modernization, as most precisely in his comprehensive but modernist-orientated social theory Jürgen Habermas took a great note of this phenomenon, mass media of expression such as books, magazines, newspapers, radios and television has somehow its manipulative power in the public or political world. In *the postmodern situation*, this very character of mass media, coupled with the development of advertisement industry, image industry and with the rise of consumer and information society, has greatly strengthened itself, so that even the state power legitimacy cannot keep its apparent stability without some extent of such a manipulation. We would like just to give two examples to this new phenomenon of manipulation as power. The first example is a local or national one. During 1989 and 1993 in a period of the so-called bubble economy in Japan, a new, new religious sect called the Aum-Shinrikyō had gathered its adepts or followers with a number of thousands in a totally undemocratic way, by way of mind control, using different kinds of manipulation such as video tapes, books, magazines, computer engineering and the others. This group of people hierarchically organized finally claimed itself as a miniaturized state within the state of Japan, confronting in March 1995 with the Japanese State Power using its own sarin gas in the metro stations, more than five thousand injured, two people killed.

The second example is an international one. During the months of May and June in 1998, this year, a drastic ups and downs of the Japanese yen feared the world economy. This threat was finally begun to be settled by an international joint currency manipulation of selling US dollars and buying yen in New York, London and Tokyo. These two examples suggest the importance of manipulation, in other words, symbolic operation in the present-day civil society locally as well as globally.

Michel Foucault’s thesis of the universality or universalization of power should, then, be re-interpreted from this axis.

**C. Civil Society and Social Movements**

In the process of a great transformation called the 1968 May *Cartier-Latin* Revolution, Alain Touraine, a Parisian sociologist coined his original sociological theory of social movements. In the long process of a making of *the modern situation* in Western Civilization, in the process of modernization since René Descartes via a series of Industrial Revolution, it is evident that the so-called nation-state had formed its clearest figure and that the strong state power had been firmly established. For example in France, which can be a model case of a transition from *the modern* to *the postmodern* situations, as the French Revolution has been argued about as an epoch-making event toward a modernist world, the 1968 May event was truly a marking point of a great transformation toward a postmodernist world, triggering a series of contestations by citizens —— from students,
intellectuals, to classical as well as new working class — against the French extremely centralized powerful state led by the typically modernist military president General De Gaulle. As a Parisian sociologist from this generation in his book published just 30 years after the May 1968, entitled, *May 68 — an impossible heritage* Jean-Pierre Le Goff has very well documented the very event, a spontaneous character of this student revolt coupled with the general strike of the French working class has produced a variety of *social*, not solely political, protests, contestations and movements against the bureaucratically organized modernist state power, including barricades-making confrontation with the state police. This revolt has an especially *social* character in the sense that everyday life repression in *the modern situation* was largely thematized so suggested as the discourse on *sexuality* and *drug*, human destruction as war symbolized by the Vietnam War at that time.

Though it is very paradoxical in that Max Weber’s social theory wasn’t popular at all in France those days except Raymond Aron’s limited reception, from the present point of view, the Weberian ambivalent attitude toward the modern society partly inclined to the pessimistic diagnosis of the bureaucratization of modern society could explain well the societal base of this worldwide student revolt against the modernist repressive society, whose theoretical element has been greatly developed by Michel Foucault in his historico-theoretical works, especially on the history of sexuality. Thus, Alain Touraine theorized this situation as new social movements mediating the permanent securing of the present-day democracy in *the postmodern situation*.

[Part 2]

A. A Critique of Modernist Social, Sociological Theory and Its Implications

a) Social Distantiation and the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the *Gulag*

As already indicated in V. [Part 1]. A., the four social and sociological theorists (G. Lukács, N. Elias, Z. Bauman and S. Ishitsuka) has commonly presented the postmodern societal thesis of social distantiation in modernity, which should not be accidental if making conscious about their societal situation, namely of the first three’s Jewish experience and the fourth’s Japanese as well as Polish one. In *the modern situation* or from the modernist social or sociological standpoint, Japanese, Italian fascism and German Nazism and their crimes against humanity had been interpreted as premodern movements and barbarous crimes. This long sustained interpretation should be, however, totally revised from the postmodernist social or sociological standpoint in *the postmodern situation*.

In this connection, among the above-mentioned four authors, Zygmunt Bauman most clearly does this task in his sociologically brilliant work, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Bauman insists that the bureaucratization of modern societies destroy the moral motive in humans, expanding a social distance among humans. This theoretical perspective is at the same time a critique of the modernist-based social and sociological theories since Descartes’ contemporary, Thomas Hobbes as well as an affirmation of an apparent negative continuation of *the modern situation* into *the postmodern* even greatly accelerating this very social distantiation.

b) A Problematic of Alienation in the Emotion

In *the modern situation*, as the post 68 philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari,
Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida emphasize, emotional elements had been treated negatively in contrast to reason.

In the postmodern situation, where the emotional, so communal elements have been drastically diminished to the extent that one could observe just in everyday life, the alienation of emotions should be put upon a subjective matter. In this line of thought, Georg Simmel (The Philosophy of Money, 1900), György Lukács (The Ontology of Social Being, 1964-71), Michel Foucault (The History of Sexuality, 1976-84), Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (Anti-Oedips, 1972), Thomas J. Scheff (The Bloody Revenge—Emotions, Nationalism and War, 1994) and Shoji Ishitsuka (Socio-philosophical Inquiries into the Present-Day Civil Society, 1995) are most suggestive. For example, as a theorist of a part of the world where, according to our observation, is most typically developed the everyday postmodern situation, Thomas J. Scheff is most sensitive to this matter, saying that in modern literature of sociology, social science in general the emotion has completely disappeared from a scientific discourse.

c) A Problematic of Nature

A new human consciousness drastically growing since 1968 should be an ecological one exemplified, in our context of argument, by the French ecological movement since 1970s and the report by the '70s established Roma Club. A linear model of economic development, coupled with an idea of the progress of even human consciousness or spirit, which can be traced to the theoretical expression in Condorcet's book, The Table of the Progress of Human Spirit (1795) as Jürgen Habermas argued about him in the section dedicated to Max Weber's social theory of modernity (The Theory of Communicative Action, 1981), has been critically surveyed in almost every domain of life in the postmodern situation, such as in the economic, the cultural and the social world.

Taking into consideration the so far developed arguments such as the insubstantiation of human relations, the growing tendency of social distanciation and the destruction of nature inner as well as external including female destruction by male dominance, we would like clearly to present the thesis of the loss of nature as the most fundamental one in the postmodern situation. In addition, we should claim the loss of nature thesis being the most fundamental to the Weberian two critical theses to the modern world, namely, the loss of meaning and the loss of freedom.

B. Two Theses on the Postmodern Situation

1) Universality of emotion vs. Universality of reason

  —toward an ethics in the postmodern situation

In the postmodern situation, we have finally made ourselves conscious that one can never base human morality or an ethical attitude by the thesis of the universality of reason. Therefore, we should admit that the moral or ethical sources are in human emotions not in reason which has long alienated the exact dwelling of moral and ethical forces of humans.

2) Manipulation as the third power in the postmodern situation

We should also insist that, in the postmodern situation, in accordance with the dominant situation of the virtual realities, images, and simulacres (Jean Baudrillard, 1981), manipulation or symbolic operation in our world be on the agenda in social and sociological inquiries.