

The Phenomenological Understanding of Social Life

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Abstract

— This article provides an overview of the basic concepts which were developed in the phenomenology. The phenomenology, especially the sociological phenomenology is considered as one of the most important traditions in the 20th century, which in its basis has the deliberation of the contemporary social sciences. By indicating the importance of the concepts of typification, the stock of knowledge and intersubjectivity here an attempt is made for humble reconstruction of the architecture of the conscious experience through which the senses is perceived, which the humans gives to his own acting, thus creating the social reality. The main emphasis in the effort is put on the work of Alfred Schultz and the development of his phenomenological tradition. The phenomenology in this work is also represented as one of the sociological theoretical traditions within the paradigm for social definitions of George Ritzer. The interest for the phenomenology here is also related to the contemporary conditions or it forwards the meta(sociological) interest for this tradition in the deliberation of micro-environments as a frame of sociological analysis.

Index Terms— Phenomenology, Alfred Schultz, typification, stock of knowledge, intersubjectivity

1 INTRODUCTION

The term phenomenology is a neologism from the Greek words phenomenon - "appearance" and logos "study", "science". Thus, phenomenology is a study, as science of the appearance. However, the appearance cannot be explored unless there is consciousness about it. Hence, the representatives or supporters of this tradition of thought considered the phenomenology as a theoretical orientation, which in the focus of its interest studies the consciousness about the appearance in a new unusual manner. The phenomenology first appeared within philosophy with the ambition of becoming a philosophical science and it was accepted as such a bit later and its principles were implemented in social sciences. The philosophical phenomenology is actually the foundation upon which sociological phenomenology is upgraded and here it is worth mentioning that the theoretical foundations of phenomenology can be found in the works of philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Henri Bergson, Franz Brentano, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schultz [24]. In sociology, as a theoretical perspective, intellectual tradition and methodological approach, the phenomenology replaced the common sense view of observation of reality as a given reality per se, based

on the ontological structure of objects which create reality and put the subjective experience of social actors in the foreground.

Although Moran [20] attempts to indicate philosophers such as Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Ernst Mach, as a predecessor of contemporary philosophy, what we know today as phenomenology, obtains its foundations first of all, from Husserl's philosophy. In the beginning of the 20th century he determined phenomenology as a philosophical science which studies the experience through which the knowledge is reached [16]. As such, the phenomenology is a foundation for all remaining philosophical disciplines. To Husserl, the phenomenology was a reflexive study of the subjective conscious experience. In this regard, the phenomenology attempts to extract the intuitive experience from the phenomena. More precisely, by using the phenomenological reduction as a method, the phenomenology attempts to separate the essence of things from our experience (reflection) about the same. The phenomenology attempts to avoid the explanations about things, before understanding the same from the inside, which in itself also results with avoidance of prejudices which are

stipulated. This observance of phenomenology is determined as *transcendental* phenomenology.

Phenomenology has relatively successful development as one of the leading intellectual movements in the 20th century. Previously it was indicated that besides the indisputable contribution of Edmund Husserl, another authors have given their contribution for the development of phenomenology, such as Martin Heidegger, Mauris Merlo-Pontuand Alfred Schultz(who applied the principles of phenomenology within sociology), however, it is maybe even more interesting that also AronGourwichdid the same within psychology. At the same time phenomenology was in dialogue with few important intellectual traditions from the 20th century, such as existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstructivism, postmodernism, whose development it partially affected.

2 THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SOCIAL LIFE

The most influential author who applied the basic principles of phenomenology for the purposes of research of social reality was Alfred Schultz. As one of the most consistent followers of the thought and work of Husserl, in the 1920's he was offered to be Husserl's assistant – but he refused this [19]. However, apart from Husserl, Shultz significantly got his inspiration from Veber. During the development of phenomenology of social world, and attempting to give credibility and theoretical foundation to the phenomenology within sociology, Schultz referred to Veber, developing the micro-sociological explication of the theory of social action, which was opposite to the prevalent dominant macro-sociological perspective of interpretation of social action proposed by Talcott Parsons.

Before more profound follow up of the work and the critical theoretical viewpoints of Shultz as the founder of the phenomenology in sociology (or creative sociology, as some authors call this theoretic orientation together with the ethnomethodology and the dramaturgical approach – Monica Morris 1977) there is one moment from his intellectual carrier that deserves special attention – which is the scientific foundation

of phenomenology. Completely conscious about the burden of sociological subjectivism (embodied in the inheritance of Veber's ideally typical constructions first of all) as one of the ingredients of the new theoretical orientation, Shultz represented unambiguously critical relation towards the possibility for scientificjustification and foundation of phenomenology.

Attempting to accomplish compliance between the aspects of social life which are subject to philosophical analysis on one side and the aspects which can be scientifically and sociologically researched, Shultz achieved results which are far from a consistent theoretical system [24]. Hence is his interest about few terms such as "consciousness", "social world", which is characterized by four areas: we-the relations (umwelt), you-the relations (mitwelt), the inheritors (folgewelt), the predecessors (vorwelt) etc. The last two concepts about the inheritors and the predecessors are less interesting for Schultz first of all due to the time limitation and the infeasibleness to put them in a certain scientific, that is, research frame. However, even when analyzing the umwelt and mitwelt, Schultz is entirely aware about the challengesof the scientific perceiving of the subjective experiences in the construction or creation of social reality. One can say that torn between the imperative of the rigorous principles of science and the subjective experiences and creations of social reality, neither Schultz was in position to fully clear out the dilemmas in sociology which bothered many people and first of all, Max Veber. Namely, in one of his works from 1962, Schultz openly asks this question in the following manner: how is it possible to include the structures of subjective knowledge with the system of objective knowledge? [27].

It is possible to suppose that these skeptical attitudes of Schultz about the objective and scientific support of the sociological research interest about the world of the everyday life, arise from his conviction that the consciousness and the social construction or the construction of social reality are too fluid and inconsistent processes to be subject to the strict scientific analysis. This does not mean that he quit from the formation of appropriate platforms for research of the subjective

experience of reality. The certainty from the sociological study of the subjective experience and construction of social reality is most obvious in the concepts about the *umwelt* and *mitwelt*.

Taking as the point of departure the conviction that the research of the direct experience offers a possibility to the researcher to acknowledge the social construction of reality, Schultz more profoundly keeps to the directly experienced social reality or the *umwelt* and the indirectly experienced social reality, that is, the *mitwelt*. Thus, *inter alia* he explores the consciousness of the actor, as well as the face-to-face interaction as appropriate frames of his everyday experience. Considering the fact that the acting of actors in the social environment is most commonly unpredictable and free, Schultz considers that for this reason, this research interest of creative sociology is outside the scientific sociology. In regard to consciousness, he goes on most profoundly and claims that through it, it is not possible to entirely reveal the roots of the social actors' acting [28]. Due to the same argumentation it is not recommendable to discuss about the face-to-face interaction within the *mitwelt* or *umwelt* world. The unpredictable nature of the human actions is a sufficient argument for Schultz to completely exclude the mental processes from the research repertoire of the scientific sociology. The face-to-face interactions cannot be a subject of scientific sociology and because of the conviction of Schultz about the nature of the *umwelt* world, where the actions of social actors shape the cultural systems, and here contrary to Parsons' conviction, they do not have analytical values outside from the actor and his motivations to act.

"I would agree with you that the cultural systems could be studied as products of acting. However, these systems of culture are the best example about an area open for analysis of the elements in which the action categories do not have an analytical importance... There is one analytical level in which the action element is excluded... all action sciences... can reach an analytical level where they can discuss exceptionally about the subjects which are constructed with the activities of an actor, and without the review of the actor himself and his actions,

The situation with the *mitwelt* is completely different, where the interaction in the everyday life has a more defaced dimension or the relations with the given types of social behavior, do not include direct experience between the actors. Considering the fact that the people get into interaction with given types of social behavior, this implies that the action itself is susceptible for analysis since there are no individuals or persons who would change their behavior. Here the level of anonymity in social contacts has critical importance and as greater it is, also the possibility for scientific research is greater. Actually, Schultz construct a scale of levels or analytical assets in the *mitwelt*-world starting from the lowest level of anonymity to the highest social distance which match with the level or the extent of highest susceptibility for scientific analysis.

The first level includes the persons that the actors have met face-to-face in the past and there is a possibility for another meeting. Although there is relatively low extent of anonymity, such relation does not include a face-to-face meeting in the future.

According to Schultz, the second level includes people that we haven't met, but the people who we study have met them. Considering the fact that the acknowledgements about these persons come from someone else and that this makes the extent of anonymity greater, if we ever meet these persons again, they will become part of the *us*-relations, that is, the *umwelt*.

At the third level are the persons who we will meet in future, until we meet them, we are dealing with types, but once the situation becomes a part of *umwelt*.

There is a level of analysis with the people who we

didn't know as precise persons, but only for their statuses and roles. For these persons it is possible to develop certain attitudes for them as types, although we have never met them before.

The next level is a level of analysis of collectivities where the functions of these collectivities are familiar to us, but not the individuals who work in them.

The sixth level is an analysis of collectivities in which there is a very small possibility to meet them deeper, so that the level of anonymity enables more approachable scientific analysis. An example for such collectivities is the mafia.

The seventh level of analysis includes the objective structures of meanings created by the contemporaries where the actors do not have and cannot have face-to-face interaction.

The last or eight level of analysis according to Schultz are the physical artifacts that were once created by persons who we haven't met and we will never meet [24].

Perceiving that the relations between the actors in social reality are becoming more and more impersonal and anonymous, Schultz sees this as a greater opportunity for analysis of the interaction. Following Max Weber with his ideal types, also Schultz builds his analytical assets which facilitate or help the scientific sociological analysis of everyday life. However, the ideal types in the analytical scheme of Schultz cannot be a result of an arbitrary process, especially since they should satisfy at least 5 postulates, a *postulate of relevance* which determines what and in which manner it will be researched, *postulate of adequacy* where it is required to construct ideal types through which the behavior of the actor in everyday life will be compatible to the ideal type who is constructed by the scientist, who provides sense for the actor and his contemporaries. *The postulate of the logical consistency* assumes constructing ideal types with a high extent of clarity and distinctiveness and they have to be in compliance with the stock of scientific knowledge or to show why that stock eventually would not be adequate. The last is *the postulate of subjective interpretation* and it refers to the fact that the model of the so-

cial world must refer to the subjective meaning that the behavior has for social actors [24].

By introducing the phenomenology as a microsociological perspective, Schultz was trying to find an answer to the question how social actors give sense to their social life. He studied the everyday usual life of individuals which is guided by the routine and includes variety of plans, dreams, visions as well as social behavior that leads to their accomplishment or suppression, depending on the social context and the prospects for realization of the given plans from one or another moment. In their lives, social actors every day and almost routinely make a variety of choices, thus surpassing the boundaries of social world which are a collection of choices they make. In this manner social actors every day pass from the world of dream into the world of science, from the world of science into the world of sport, from the world of sport into the world of film, from the world of film into the world of family, from the world of family to the world of art, from the world of art to the world of religion etc. According to Schultz, the movement through all these worlds with a personal reality provides the conscious experience to social actors, which is personal, and he calls it primary unity. Thus, there are no facts for themselves, independent from the personal, individual, subjective experience of social actors. But what occurs as a problem for Schultz is to explain how that subjective experience functions, how do we give certain sense to it on one hand, and surpassing of the gap between the individual experience and generally accepted truths, as well as the sense not only of the individual, but also of the wider social reality. For resolving these aporias in phenomenology, three concepts were developed, and they were elaborated in more detail by Schultz: typification, stock of knowledge and intersubjectivism.

3 TYPIFICATION

The typification could be determined as a classification of the knowledge and their meanings. The typification is part of the process of social construction which could come down to clas-

sification and assigning meanings to certain types of objects [11]. The assigning of meanings to objects is mostly related to the process of denomination, that is, the names which are assigned to certain objects. In our consciousness the names of objects are related to the things they represent. The source of these relations is experience. Hence, Rogers [26] referring to the opening of Schultz, determines the typification as:

- Experience with a given type of objects. The application of experience implies consciousness about the present, as well as the previous experience with a given type of objects which is projected into the future in case if the typification is accepted and used in social life, thus organically connecting the social actors which are using it.
- Abstract character of intentions. The objects have certain characteristics which repeat. Social actors separate the characteristics which repeat and they connect them to the name they assign to a certain object.
- The typification does not refer only to the process of denomination (giving names), but also to the results from that process, that is, the inclusion of given typifications, as well as the social contexts in which they are used. The typification is a process conducted by the individual social actors in the interpersonal communication, as well as the collectivities.

To a certain extent typifications are generalizations which occur by ignoring the particular characteristics of the objects that are considered as irrelevant [3]. They are formed in a certain context and have a certain objective. Hence, they are conditioned from the social-historical context in which they occur, as well as from the objectives which they need to fulfill. Since they depend on the historical-social processes, typifications differs from one society to another, from one culture to another, and this can be

mostly conceived in the differences and specifics of languages which are spoken in certain societies as well as in certain cultures from a certain society. Further on, through the process of socialization, the typifications are accepted for granted, as givennesses, part of the objective reality which is taken into consideration during the action of social actors and in this manner it directly affects them.

4 STOCK OF KNOWLEDGE

The stock of knowledge is a concept used for denoting the passive knowledge, that is, the knowledge which is stocked in our subconsciousness, and which we use only temporarily. The collection of these passive experiences and knowledge greatly contributes for the creation of the common sense [25]. The stocked knowledge does not have well-defined, precise structure, on the contrary they constantly change and reformulate depending on the moment and the needs of the ones who use them. As Schultz explains it, knowledge is incoherent because of the individual interests due to which we approach towards research of the objects are different and cannot be systematized. The knowledge is only partially organized in a form of plans about life, work, holidays etc. The knowledge is partially clear since social actors only in rare cases and with an exception, are interested to completely and systematically learn the things and principles according to which they function. At the same time, knowledge can often be inconsistent. Namely, different points of view can sometimes be equally valid.

The stock of knowledge is built in communication with the remaining members of the society in very different social arrangements such as the family, friends, colleagues from work etc. and serves for interpretation of reality and making decisions about the social actions which need to be taken over. It is something like a phenomenological collective unconsciousness which can be temporarily actualized, depending on the needs of social actors [10].

5 INTERSUBJECTIVISM

Intersubjectivism or cosubjectivity, as it was determined by Schultz in one occasion, represents a space which floats between the individual and the structure and it is built through communication with the others, and on the basis of the typifications and the stock of knowledge as preconditions [35].

Once the intersubjectivity is established, we understand the sense which social actors assign to their words and actions, according to the analogy of the sense we assign to our own words and actions. Intersubjectivity as a phenomenological concept is an attempt to overcome the monological subjectivism and to put the emphasis on the mutual shared knowledge and understandings interpreted through the conscious survived experience [7]. This concept was developed by Husserl, but it was especially important for Schultz who insisted a lot on it. Husserl's intersubjectivism enabled understanding of subjects as active, conscious, experienced social actors which contributed for the objectivisation of the image of the world as a collection of social interactions between social actors, which opens the perspectives of the individual experiences of social actors who mutually communicate creating wider social community, which inter alia also represents a community of knowledge.

In the conceptualization of intersubjectivism Schultz went further than Husserl. As Flaherty [6] writes about Husserl, the intersubjectivity was based on the a priori characteristics of the consciousness of social actors, the intersubjectivity for Schultz was not only a matter of the given nature of social actors, but it is also acquired through socialization, social interaction and communication. Thus, the intersubjective world is a common social world of all social actors, which is not fragmented and as such, it is a simple collection of the separate world of the social actors who constitute it, although it is indisputable that social actors have an autonomy and space to experience and explore the common social world in their own manner. This means that although the social world is one, only and intersubjective for all social actors, it allows the existence of many

parallel realities. In this manner the intersubjective world surpasses the tension between the external time/space dimension which is quantitative, successive and arranged and the internal time/space dimension which is qualitative, chaotic, unarranged [22].

6 CONCLUSION

The concepts which were developed in the phenomenology enabled enrichment of the category apparatus, deepening of the perspectives for research of social reality, as well as deepening of the acknowledgements of the same. It was one of the foundations on the basis of which the theory of social constructivism of Berger and Luckmann was later on developed, in which they claimed that the reality is socially conditioned. Great part of this idea was argued and developed by Schultz explaining the concepts of typification, the stock of knowledge and intersubjectivism. In this manner, the phenomenology proposed a method to release the sediments of additional and encumbering meanings, in order to understand their essential sense, that social constructivism analyses the same in one broader context.

Observing the wider context, phenomenology of social life is among the array of microsociological theories developed in the 20th century as part of the paradigm of social definitions of Ritzer together with the symbolic interactionism, the ethnomethodology, social constructivism, the dramaturgical theory, the theory of communicative action etc. According to other views, the phenomenology is part of creative sociology, and as such it still struggles with the basic ontological challenges for postulating a solid foundation as one of the many theories in the contemporary sociology. The subject of research of the phenomenological discourse despite the few decade development still suffers from the insufficiently conceptualized methodological instrumentariums and approaches to the world of social reality, first of all due to the reliance on the fluid objects of research such as human consciousness and the face-to-face interaction. However, it is considered that with the appear-

ance of phenomenology at the scene of the theoretical orientations and paradigms, a transition was made from the stage of analysis to the stage of analysis of understanding between the social actors which constitute the social world.

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