THE SOCIOLOGICAL PROMISE AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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In June 2014, Pekka called me and asked whether I would be interested in helping out with a course that he was planning on the history and current issues of sociological thought. That is how I ended up both assisting him and lecturing on Scottish Enlightenment social theory in what turned into a series of lecture courses with the rather ambitious title: *The Sociological Promise from Hobbes to Post-modern Critics, Parts I–III*. In this piece, I will reflect on some of the key themes of those courses. By doing so, I endeavour to reconstruct and contextualize Pekka's conception of sociology, sociological theory, and its history as he has come to perceive it towards the end of his tenured academic career.

The notion of sociological promise derives, of course, from C. Wright Mills' modern classic, *The Sociological Imagination* (2000 [1959]). 'Sociological imagination' and the concomitant 'promise' epitomized Mills' alternative for the two then-dominant forms of sociological inquiry: the conceptual grand theorising of Talcott Parsons, and the 'abstracted empiricism' of quantitative social research in the vein of Paul Lazarsfeld and others. Neither of the two lived up to what Mills saw as the proper task of sociology, which was *'to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society'*, so as to translate the personal troubles of people *'into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals'* (ibid. 4, 187). Whatever the subject of a particular sociological study, then, it was to be sensitive to three kinds of background questions: those concerning (1) the structure of society as a whole and how it differed 'from other varieties of social order'; (2) the historical making of that society and the forces changing it at the present; and (3) the *'kinds of human nature'* that were *'revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period'* (ibid., 4–5). Sociology needed a theory of social structure or social order; otherwise it would run the risk of psychologizing explanations. But that theory – and here Parsons would fail – had to be sensitive to

history and empirical evidence that spoke of the existence of many kinds of social orders, and also of conflicts within societies.

I think it is fair to say that Pekka's oeuvre echoes Mills' general outline for how sociology should be done, as witnessed, for instance, in his major book-length studies on the middle class, and the problems of lifestyle regulation in the (late) modern society, *The European New Middle Class* (1992) and *The Saturated Society* (2009). Relatedly, Pekka has been critical of contemporary sociology growing increasingly distant from this ideal (Sulkunen 2014a). Much in keeping with Mills, he has noted a trend of sociologists becoming 'mere behavioural scientists' – as he once put it – who study diverse phenomena and problems of social life without connection to any theoretical understanding of society as a whole. This can be seen as a reflection of the fact that the notion of society as it derived from the classical period of sociology has been subject to much criticism during the past few decades. Following William Outhwaite, Pekka has delineated three streams or sources of this criticism as follows: 1) action theory where agency is given priority over structure; 2) post-modernism, either in the form of epistemic critique of sociological concepts, or as moral criticism levied against social science for having been part of the 'modern project' of rationalization-cum-oppression; and 3) globalization theories and their criticism of 'nation' being the fundamental point of reference in most sociological notions of society. (Sulkunen 2007; 2014.)

While some eminent sociologists have argued to the effect that the whole concept of society that implies some unifying principle has become obsolete (e.g. Baumann 2000; Beck 2005), one could equally claim that we live in a world where a sociological theory of what keeps societies together is needed more than ever. Pekka has argued that the historical realisation of the key components of Western subjectivity – autonomy and intimacy – has added a whole new matrix of differences and conflicts over the more traditional struggles based on class, status and gender (Sulkunen, 2009; 2011). Indeed, contemporary conflicts often manifest as symbolic conflicts where there seems to be no common ground for negotiation over tangible interests. This does not mean that the core problematic of sociological theory, the one concerning unity and difference in society, has become obsolete. Quite the contrary, new sociological insights are needed for understanding both integration and conflict. While we may not find ready answers from Durkheim or Marx, sociology, in Pekka's view, still needs to stick to

the classical sociological way of theorizing, where the conditions of social order and the logic of conflicts are sought in 'the social' itself, rather than in some external force or 'the political' as such. Equally, sociology has to keep fighting what Bourdieu called 'the anthropological monster', the vulgar view of human nature as driven solely by self-interest and utilitarian calculus. In this task, Pekka held, perusal of the historical foundations of social theory is of much value.

The reason for going all the way back to early modern thinkers was that the idea of 'society on its own' first started to take shape in that era. Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) was an important catalyst for this development, as much of Enlightenment social theory relevant to sociology today emerged as a reaction to Hobbes' theory of the political society and its underlying presuppositions concerning the human nature. Writing in the wake of the Civil War in England and the more general crisis of divine and natural legitimizations of monarchies in post-Reformation Europe, Hobbes strived to provide a philosophical justification for the necessity of absolutist government. Famously, he postulated a conception of human nature where the only motive common to us all was self-interest that aimed at self-preservation, while the rest of our individual desires varied greatly. With no guarantee that others respect our life as they pursue their own desires, this led to precautious action and war of all against all in the pre-political state of nature. The only way out of this misery – as reason suggested – was a social contract whereby every individual handed their right to defend themselves over to a sovereign ruler. Social order, thus, could be based only on political authority that took up and monopolized the task of judging and preventing injustices among disparate individuals.

The most notable strand of normative political analysis that emerged as a reaction to Hobbesian absolutism was arguably the one commonly identified with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of the social contract and the origins of inequality. Pekka has recently published on Roussseauvian Republicanism and its paradoxes, drawing especially on Reinhart Koselleck (Sulkunen, 2014a). He also gave insightful presentations on the subject during the lecture courses. However, here I want to move on to discuss the Scottish Enlightenment, where the normative social contract theories were substituted with more empirical and, in my view, more properly sociological analysis of society and social order by the likes of David

Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. This is also a theme where Pekka's and my own scholarly interests overlapped the most.

In my own lecture that drew notably on Christopher Berry's (1997) work, I presented the general features of the Scottish turn towards a more sociological inquiry of society as follows (Ruuska, 2015). In epistemic terms, it built on a view that any theory of society was to be based on empirical evidence. Hume and others criticized the Hobbesian – and also the Rousseauvian – state of nature as 'philosophical fiction' that was of little use, as it did not correspond with the evidence we had of people having always lived in societies, *'joined by affection to one party'* while *'possibly opposed to another'*, as Adam Ferguson (2007 [1767], 9) would put it. Relatedly, the methodological individualism and rationalism of the social contract theories was rebutted. Individuals did not form societies through deliberate contracts. Instead, societies pre-existed specific individuals. The character of individuals and groups, their beliefs and opinions took shape in historical societies. So did the various forms of government and their justifications that we could observe across times and nations. Furthermore, human beings were rational, for sure, but reason was not the basis of sociability and its variable institutional manifestations. Rather, we were ultimately moved by passions, selfish as well as benevolent, and this was the direction in which we were to seek for the causes and dynamics of our social behaviour. While the founding figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, Frances Hutcheson still argued that natural and universal benevolence was the foundation of virtuous sociability, David Hume and Adam Smith went on to place at the centrepiece the psychological faculties of imagination and sympathy by which we could assume a spectator's viewpoint to our own passions and actions, and enter into sentiments of others. This intersubjective feature of human nature facilitated the channelling and balancing our *selfish* and *unsocial* passions in *sociable ways*. This very idea opened a new way for conceptualizing the foundations and functions of social institutions in large societies that could not be held together by our necessarily limited benevolent affections.

For Pekka, it was precisely the dynamics of passions, sympathy and the institutions of society that had drawn him to scrutinize the Scottish Enlightenment more carefully since around the turn of the 21st century. Here he reflects the more general trend of the past few decades whereby especially Adam Smith has been 'rediscovered' and vindicated also by sociologists as an insightful theorist of the

social bond and society (e.g. Barbalet, 1998). In Finland, notably Risto Kangas' thesis on the history of sociology and the concept of society, *Yhteiskunta* (2001), paid close attention to Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiment*s around the same time, and this was not left unnoticed by Pekka (Sulkunen 2002). Most recently, Pekka's interest in the Enlightenment has been stimulated by a renowned study on Bernard Mandeville and David Hume by Mikko Tolonen (2013), who also gave three lectures on the courses. Tolonen's reading of Mandeville and Hume advances the understanding of some of the key sociological insights of Enlightenment thought. Indeed, for Pekka, it went straight to the core of the question concerning social order in large societies that are constituted by autonomous agents (Sulkunen 2014b).

A doctor, satirist and philosopher of Dutch origin, Mandeville is commonly regarded as the proponent of a view that self-interest is not only the fundamental moving force of human nature, but also a source of public benefits if freed from the chains imposed by hypocrite moralists and politicians. Tolonen (2013), however, brings to light a change in Mandeville's thought in a later edition of his infamous *Fable of the Bees* that made room in human motivation also for benevolent passions, but even more notably for what Mandeville called self-liking. Self-liking or pride referred to a natural human inclination or desire to value and feel satisfied with oneself. The sociologically notable point here is that pride necessitated a social context where we could confirm our opinion of ourselves by others' approval. The necessity of taking regard to others' opinion of us modified and cultivated not only our expressions of pride but also our pursuit of self-interest. This engendered general moral conceptions of honour and individual sovereignty that were crucial to social order in large societies.

Hume and Smith developed this line of argument further in their theories of how we – by way of the psychological mechanism of sympathy – form emotionally founded judgments concerning our own and others' conduct, merit and demerit. These relational processes were the foundation of the key socially constructed virtue, justice, which modified and levelled the expression our unsocial passions, hatred and anger. Importantly, Hume and Smith noted that in large societies where the social distance between individuals may grow wide, social cohesion has to be founded on generalized conceptions of justice, which have to be consolidated into institutional arrangements maintained and administered by a 'political society' or government (see Sulkunen 2014a; 2014b). 'The

social', rather than 'the political', still remains the fundamental foundation of social order. As noted above, governments are not formed through contracts or plans, and their authority is not based on deliberate acts whereby individuals give their consent to be ruled (Hume 1987, II.XII). Rather, governments take shape historically, as part of more general social processes, and it is '*time and custom*' that give '*authority to all forms of government and all successions of princes*' (Hume 2011 [1739/1740], 3.2.10). The social nature of this process entails that any government – both the most despotic and the most free – is dependent on the opinion of its subjects, on people's interests and their emotionally founded judgments concerning the virtues of the government (Hume 1987, I.IV.1).

For Pekka, the sociological relevance of the Scottish Enlightenment laid essentially in the idea – even if still somewhat elementary in its form in Mandeville, Hume and Smith – that a 'society standing on its own' hinges on general principles of justice and worth that also make social hierarchies and inequalities comprehensible and manageable. This very insight has since been elaborated by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) who hail from the school of Bourdieu, a major source of influence also for Pekka since the early 1980s (see Sulkunen 1982; 2009). In Pekka's view, their *theory of justification* steers clear from the one-sidedness inherent in the classical sociological integration and conflict theories. Conflict and integration have to be taken as 'equal partners' in any theory that aims to facilitate analysis of social order, unity and difference. Inequalities and differences will always be part of any social order, as Boltanski and Thévenot argue. A central – and we could say very Millsian – task for sociology is to translate the ensuing conflicts that often take the form of diffuse symbolic struggles into negotiable issues of concrete interests and justification. The underlying conflicts may be over conceptions of the common good, the meaning of dignity and the order of worth, or the principles of belonging and differentiation – the three dimensions of justification that are required by any social order, but whose contents are subject to historical change. (Sulkunen 2015.)

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