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Theories of Social Change

A Critical Appraisal

RAYMOND BOUDON
Translated by J. C. Whitehouse

Polity Press

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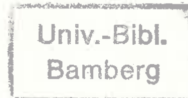

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In his *Business Cycles*, one of the major books in the field of economic sociology, Schumpeter is perhaps the writer who has most successfully brought out the insufficiency of any *structural* theory of innovation. In the case of industrialization in England, the *inventions* put to use by industrialists under the Tudors and Stuarts were in most cases importations from abroad. German methods were used for pumping out mines, for example, and techniques introduced from Germany or Holland transformed iron and steel manufacture. As the energy used came basically from wood, the increased production of iron and steel in particular brought with it not only an increase in the price of that commodity but also measures for the protection of forests. In this case, innovation was not a response to a demand formulated by the environment or the consequences of, for example, an earlier extension of markets encouraging producers to step up their productivity. It was rather a consequence of the fact that entrepreneurs decided to produce at home goods that had hitherto been imported and to use methods of production that had been developed abroad. In doing so, they caused disturbances in the existing equilibrium - such as a shortage of wood - which gave rise to adaptation reactions on the part of other actors and also offered them the *opportunity* of developing other innovations. Resistance by the environment to the consequences of certain innovations (for example, measures to protect forests) can also make it easier for other innovations to occur. Thus replacing wood by coal, which had for long only been used in certain particular activities such as the glass industry, was the result of a long and complex process, of which one factor was the exhaustion of supplies of wood.

What Schumpeter proposed in his analyses is that innovation should be seen as the result of a strategy that is based on but does not mechanically follow from the data of the environment, since the latter provide *opportunities* which may or may not be taken. In addition, it must be emphasized that the characteristic features of the environment need to be seen as the convergence of independent series, in Cournot's sense of the term. Thus in Stuart times the ironmaster was in a *situation* that provided cheap energy (in the form of wood) and the chance of using processes developed abroad.

This strategic and interactionist view of innovation, which can be contrasted with the 'structural' image of it, also entails an important corollary, which is that any analysis aiming to provide a spatial and temporal location for any large-scale process and to see it as the consequence of dominant *factors* is generally no more than an illusion. As Schumpeter ironically notes, one can, if one wishes, use an expression like 'the English industrial revolution', provided that one does not let oneself be trapped by words and picture the 'revolution' as a phenomenon that can be called a 'break', explicable by one or two simple causes, and that one takes care to remember that the 'event' or 'break' took place over a period extending from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century. As we have seen, these observations also apply to the cases, examined above, of development in Japan or Colombia. The analyses of both Dore and Hagen, although dealing with defined processes, are situated within a very long time-scale. The same is true of Hirschman's studies of Brazil mentioned in the last chapter. These observations are enough to rule out any theory claiming to reduce the processes of social change to dominant factors, whether they be dependence, cultural change, the resorption of bottlenecks, extending markets, the class struggle, the features of political organization, or the like.

CHANCE AND THE PART IT PLAYS

In the social sciences, chance is generally thought to be a very unwelcome guest, ubiquitous but studiously concealed, ignored and even denied the right to exist by virtually everyone. There are differing opinions about the ontological status it should be given. Some see it as having objective existence, but most think of it as merely the result of our ignorance, holding that we only see a phenomenon as not being fully determined because we do not have access to all the variables that shape it. Opinions about what chance is exactly, may vary, but if there is one point on which there is more or less total agreement in the social sciences and perhaps in even wider circles, it is that by its very nature it is of no interest from the point of view of knowledge. How could the fact that an event is due to chance interest the sociologist or economist or, more generally, anyone concerned with understanding why that event occurs? When we say that it is due to chance, are we not really saying that it has *no* cause, or at least none that we know? In fact, not only does it certainly *exist*, but it is important to *recognize* that it exists if we wish to account for an enormous number of phenomena.

In an excellent book on Leninism, Colas has convincingly shown that throughout his life Lenin was dominated by an orchestral image of social order and the organization of societies.[15] An admirer of Taylorism and fascinated by the docile way in which musicians obey the conductor's baton, he was also captivated by the capitalist firm, with its order and discipline and the clockwork precision with which each of the workers in it carried out his allotted task. So it is not surprising that his chief contribution to Marxism was his theory of the party as the guide, conscience and organizer of the masses. Just as musicians cannot play without the conductor, or workers create a complex product without management, so the revolutionary fervour of the masses was doomed to remain a mere potentiality without a party to co-ordinate its energies and organize its activities. Where Marx had hesitated, Lenin decided swiftly: the party was to go ahead of the masses, direct their activities and provide them with a doctrine. By means of a careful and brilliant analysis of his writings, Colas shows that from *What Is To Be Done?* onwards not only the political thesis of the party as the guide and conscience of the masses, but also representations of the social order on which the thesis is based are a persistent feature of his work. The metaphor of the orchestra, the admiration for Taylorism, military discipline and the division and meticulous co-ordination of the modern factory appear again and again as a leitmotiv. In addition, he insistently expresses his distrust of what was later to be called worker-management and his distaste for collective spontaneity, which seemed to him to be inevitably a 'hysterical' form of expression.

Quite deliberately, Colas refuses to try to get into the mind of his 'author'. He also refuses to put Lenin's writings into their political context. All he sets out to do is to show the recurring themes of Lenin's discourse and illustrate their organization, coherence and stability. With a man of action and a maker of history, it was a bold but justified choice. Throughout two decades, the writings were rigid and repetitive. No doubt pragmatism and opportunism caused him to change his position with regard to practical questions, but where essential matters - the role of the party, the principles of organization and the effectiveness of political action - were concerned, the texts remain surprisingly unyielding and profoundly insensitive to current circumstances. Very skilfully, Colas convinces his reader of the validity of the hypothesis that Lenin's political action and doctrine were the product of a system of representations of the world and of the social order that barely changed from those in *What Is To Be Done?*

But not from earlier ones. A few years before the pamphlet was published, Lenin had defended ideas diametrically opposed to those in it, which are perhaps the expression of a system of beliefs. They are also - as we shall see - the product of a Cournot effect, that is, of the convergence of two independent causal series. Cournot, of course, illustrated the idea by means of very simple examples, such as that of a falling slate stunning a passer-by. The fall of the slate was certainly predetermined. It was not properly fastened on the roof and was at the mercy of the slightest gust of wind. The fact that the passer-by was walking just below the roof was also the result of an easily traceable causality. He was going about his business that day as on any other day and was thus bound to pass below the roof in question. So we are dealing here with two causal series. The fact that they converge, however, is, according to Cournot, not causally determined, since there was nothing to make the slate fall just as the man was passing by.

If a writer uses simple explanatory examples to illustrate a concept, this sometimes means that the field of application of the concept is not very well understood. This seems to have been the fate lying in wait for Cournot's theory, for, even when it is accepted, the temptation is sometimes to think that it can only be applied to trivial cases of the kind he uses as illustrations. The example of Lenin, however, shows that it is to the advantage of students of social change to keep Cournot's theory of chance constantly in mind if they want to avoid going against their own wishes and principles and being obliged to detect the hand of Providence at work.

In 1895, Lenin maintained that the role of the intelligentsia was merely 'to join up with the workers' movement, to bring light into it, to assist the workers in the struggle they themselves had begun to wage'.[16] Why should that be so? It is not hard to imagine why, and all we need do is examine the political and economic situation in Russia at the time. Major industrial expansion was under way in 1890, as has been shown by Gerschenkron in particular.[17] Investment from abroad was high and unemployment low and, as is often the case at times of rapid growth, there were many strikes. They began amongst workers in small craft industries in the large towns and in Moscow in particular, but subsequently spread to large concerns. The workers were naturally happy to be able to call on

intellectuals for help and to benefit from their assistance in matters of organization and propaganda. At the same time, however, they were mindful of the populist agitation that had occurred a few years earlier and did not forget that extremist intellectuals had sought to shape the course of history by resorting to political terrorism. That was one of the reasons why they had certain reservations about them.

Thus the economic situation, the intensity of the working-class struggle and the reservations that the workers had about intellectuals combined to force upon Lenin, that committed intellectual, the 'theory' that he in fact defended at the time, namely that the workers are the chief agents of social change and the initiators of their own struggle, and that the intellectuals can help working-class movements by acting as auxiliaries and assistants. Since he was both a professional politician and an intellectual, it was natural for Lenin to express an opinion about the problem of the relationship between workers and intellectuals. If he wished to retain any influence, he could not diverge from the 'theory' that the circumstances dictated. Seeing this as mere opportunism is pointlessly simplistic. If was of course to his advantage to espouse the 'theory' of the working-class movement currently accepted by, or at least widespread in, working-class circles. If he had taken up the opposite position, as he was to do a few years later, he would have lost all his influence. It is quite likely, however, that he actually believed the theory. The upheavals arising from the lightning industrial growth taking place in Russia were making their effects strongly felt, as were also the massive strikes. In a situation of that kind, it was not only difficult to express publicly the populist theory of the intellectual as the conscience and guide of the passive masses, but no doubt also quite simply hard to believe it.

A few years later, there was a major slump. Despite the earlier boom and the scale of the working-class movement, the workers did not have a sufficient level of either organization or wages to amass any appreciable collective or individual assets. As a result, agitation declined and then disappeared. On the whole, the workers were more concerned with keeping their jobs and their resources than with engaging in political action. The new economic situation meant that the workers were more likely to defend their own individual interests than to engage in protests and collective action, and the working class no longer seemed to be the vehicle of history.

Over the same period, and without any clear link between the two phenomena, the enlightened elite was also engaging in 'class' behaviour. Economic growth had meant an increase in the numbers of those receiving an education. The St Petersburg students, who had been harassed by the tsarist authorities, began to agitate and were soon joined by others. A cycle of alternating violence and repression set in, and gradually the students became a pole of attraction and a focus not only for malcontents of every ilk but also for many who were politically opposed to the regime. This was so to such an extent that in 1901 it seemed to be the enlightened intelligentsia rather than the working class that was the vehicle of history. It was that intelligentsia that provided the resistance to authority. And indeed, had not students played a considerable part in the politics of Europe throughout the nineteenth century and formed the kernel of movements producing profound political and social change?

It was in such circumstances that Lenin was writing *What Is To Be Done?* In that pamphlet, he distinguishes between workers who are politically unaware and workers who are not, tells intellectuals what their essential role in organizing the working-class movement will be and draws the distinction between the enlightened elite and the masses who are unaware of the centralizing and authoritarian principles of organization. From this point onwards, we are acquainted with what happened, which was that these principles were inevitably accepted and shaped the real world. *What Is To Be Done?* sets out the principles that in fact guided the organization of social democracy in Russia. When in the years leading up to the First World War the economic situation changed once more and strikes broke out again, it was not as influential a factor as it had been in 1901 or 1902. Henceforth, the social democratic movement was a party organized on Leninist lines and no longer a nascent political organization. In 1912 Lenin thus simply recognized in his words the spontaneously revolutionary character of the working class and in his practice kept up a certain degree of democracy in the life of the party, without modifying its organizational principles. The war decimated the working class and thus meant that it was possible to introduce the rigorous form of Bolshevik organization that was to be perpetuated for many long years to come.

In my view, it is impossible to understand that history if we do not detect the presence of a series of Cournot effects in it. Obviously,

neither the worker movements occurring around 1895, nor the fact that they lost their thrust after the depression at the turn of the century, nor the reappearance of student movements in the early 1900s, are inexplicable phenomena. However, although the chains of cause and effect are easy to discover, they are not completely linked to each other. No doubt industrialization accounts for the appearance of worker movements and the birth of political parties claiming to have their origins in them, but there was no logical necessity for the iskrists to lay the foundations of their organization at a time when the working-class movements were at their nadir. The partial linkings are intelligible, as is the way they converge, but the *synchronization* between them cannot be seen as the result of a rigorous determinism. The fact that two series converge at a given stage of development can have crucial and irreversible consequences. There was no logical necessity for the worker and student movements to be out of phase with each other or for one to be growing while the other was fading out. Separately, the two phenomena could be explained, but neither was the cause of the other and it was not foreordained that they should succeed each other in any particular order.

The foregoing story has a typical structure that is very often detectable when social processes are being analysed. The linkings A C B (with A being the cause of B) do not make up a total order A c B c C c . . . , or even a partial order (A c B c C and B c D). What they *do* make up is a set of partial linkings (A c B, B c D and so on). The fact that the latter coexist in time causes *sui generis* effects, the nature of which depends on the synchronization between the series. The latter can be observed *post factum*, but is seldom predictable.

Chance is therefore not *nothing*. It is a particular *form* that sets of cause/effects linkings *as perceived by a real observer* can take on. Some of them have a total form of order (the match causes a fire that causes the fire brigade to arrive). Others have a partial form of order (the match causes a fire and also causes the person holding it to cry out in pain). Others contain contingent links (the series 'A causes B, which causes C' occurs at the same time as 'P causes Q, which causes R') but it is impossible to decide whether the synchronization is really between B and P, B and Q or C and Q. It is therefore impossible to tell whether event BP, BQ or CQ will necessarily be brought about. And the three events can have very different consequences.

So there is such a thing as chance, and here we can follow Cournot's thought, which is both simple and profound, in all fidelity. To do that, we must see chance not as a substance, a variable or a set of variables, but as a *structure* which is characteristic of certain sets of causal chains as perceived by an observer. In any case, it can to my mind be seen as something quite different from the entirely empty, negative and scientifically uninteresting concept that Thom talks about.[18]

The theses Lenin put forward in *What Is To Be Done?* were perhaps more in line with his personality than those he had defended a few years earlier. Perhaps - at first without knowing it and later quite consciously - he always had an orchestral view of social order. That, however, seems to be a part, and perhaps a small part, of the story. If we are to *understand* why Leninism and its authoritarian face became essential, we need to take into account the (contingent) circumstances in which the doctrine was formulated.

If it is true that a *chance* event is generally of very little scientific interest, then taking into account the place of chance may be indispensable if we are to understand an event. Certain things I do are basically explicable in terms of the structure of my personality, others can only be understood if it can be seen that I found myself in particular circumstances. There was no compelling necessity for me to be in them, but an external observer who was unaware of them would not be able to understand why I acted as I did. Similarly, what Lenin did and what positions he took up cannot be understood without a perception of the circumstances he found himself in.