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Taylor's Conception of Social Imaginary. A Philosopher's Contribution to the Social Sciences

Summary

This article is discussing the notion of social imaginary used by Charles Taylor as the example of interdisciplinary approach that creates a fertile connection between philosophy and social sciences. It starts with showing the presence of this notion in work of Jacques Lacan and Cornelius Castoriadis. Afterwards it argues that social imaginary represents Taylor key conception allowing him a better understanding of the complex phenomenon of modernity in the West. The notion of social imaginary can be also perceived as a concrete implementation in the field of social sciences of an approach alternative to epistemological construal, criticized by Taylor.

Keywords

    social imaginary, Charles Taylor,
    epistemological construal, modernity,
    social sciences, social theory, social practice

KONCEPCJA IMAGINARIUM SPOŁECZNEGO TAYLORA. WKŁAD FILOZOFA W ROZWÓJ NAUK SPOŁECZNYCH

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia pojęcie imaginarium społecznego Charlesa Taylora jako przykład podejścia interdyscyplinarnego, które stwarza twórczy związek pomiędzy filozofią a naukami społecznymi. Rozpoczyna się od krótkiej prezentacji tego pojęcia w myśli Jacques'a Lacana i Corneliusa Castoriadisa. Następnie ukazuje, że imaginarium społeczne stanowi dla Taylora zasadnicze pojęcie umożliwiające mu lepsze zrozumienie złożonego zjawiska zachodniej nowoczesności. Koncepcja ta może także być postrzegana jako konkretne zastosowanie na polu nauk społecznych podejścia alternatywnego do krytykowanej przez Taylora interpretacji epistemologicznej (epistemological construal).

Słowa kluczowe

   imaginarium społeczne, Charles Taylor, interpretacja
   epistemologiczna, nowoczesność, nauki społeczne, teoria
   i praktyka społeczna

Our contemporary western culture undergoes in many aspects the process of specialization. As true as this statement may be, there are also certain attempts, above all in some academic circles, to take distance from this general tendency as having negative consequences for our society.[1] The interdisciplinary reflection on reality in its various forms is gaining more attention. One of the recognized contemporary

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1   An interesting insight into specialization of knowledge in the West was given by Martin Heidegger in his essay *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*. He attempts in this essay to approach the essence of modernity. The way to the essence of modernity leads him through reflection on one of its essential aspects (*Erscheinung*) – modern science (*Wissenschaft*). The essence of the modern science consists in research (*Forschung*). The research in this sense comes about through the defining of the specified field – the object of particular science. There is no room for one universal science, but there are many particular sciences. Therefore the specialization (*Spezialistik*) that occurs is essential to the science and is also the main engine of its progress [Heidegger 2003, p. 76-83].

thinkers who was able to operate in his work on the crossroad between several scientific disciplines is Charles Taylor. He is perceived first of all as a philosopher, and philosophy has traditionally attempted to obtain a general view of human knowledge, even though this kind of aspiration was questioned by some philosophical currents, recently by the so-called postmodernists. Taylor focuses mostly on human sciences, but his interest goes well beyond these. In the following text I would like to present his concept of social imaginary, which he borrowed from sociology and conceived as a pivotal notion in his reflection on Modernity. Taylor's conception of social imaginary is interesting because of its interdisciplinary character, within of course the bounds of the social sciences. But it can be also very interesting as Taylor's concrete contribution to the argument around the very nature of the scientific character of social sciences and their methods, which I intend to show in the following text.

The term "imaginary" itself has quite an interdisciplinary story. Its scientific career began in psychology, where it was used by the French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan.[2] He applied the term "imaginaire" to the early phase of development of the psychological self and wrote about the whole imaginary order connected with it. The term imaginary (still in its French version as "imaginaire") was used again by Cornelius Castoriadis. One could trace here the influence of Lacan, because there was a period of time, in which Castoriadis followed Lacan's ideas and became a psychoanalyst himself. Though their ways parted and Castoriadis developed his own psychoanalytic approach. Castoriadis' intellectual interests were broader than Lacan's, who limited himself rather, even though not exclusively, to psychoanalysis and psychiatry. Castoriadis was a philosopher, economist and sociologist before he happened to become a psychoanalyst. This is why Castoriadis applied the term "imaginary" in a much broader sense, not only to individuals, but also to societies. Imagination and imaginary are for him crucial factors at work within human beings and societies throughout the history:

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2   The imaginary order forms a part of his complex theory reinterpreting Freud and revising the practice of psychoanalysis [Lacan 2006, p. 75-81; Lacan 1975, p. 87-182].

(...) one can "explain" neither the birth of society nor the evolutions of history by natural, biological, or other such factors any more than by some "rational" activity of a "rational" being (man). One notices in history, from its origin, the emergence of the radically new; and if one doesn't try to have recourse to transcendent factors in order to account for it, one really has to postulate a creative potential, a *vis formandi*, that is immanent to human collectivities as well as to singular human beings. From then on, it is entirely natural to call *imaginary* and *imagination* this faculty of radical novation, creation, and formation. Language, customs, norms, and technique cannot "be explained" by factors external to human collectivities. No natural, biological, or logical factor can account for them. At the very most, they can constitute their necessary (most of the time external and trivial) conditions, never their sufficient conditions. We therefore must admit that there is in human collectivities a creative potential, a *vis formandi*, which I call the *instituting social imaginary* [Castoriadis, p. 124-125].[3]

There is a striking parallel between the notion of imaginary elaborated by Castoriadis and that developed by Taylor. Both of them point to the social imaginary as a factor that plays an essential role in the changes taking place within human societies. On the other hand there is a significant difference between them that lies basically in the fact that Castoriadis perceives imaginary as a dynamic creative potential instituting and shaping society, whereas social imaginary for Taylor is less an active cause of change than an important social reality that undergoes changes. The changes within social imaginary on their side have led to the transformation of society. The relatively close affinity of Taylor's and Castoriadis' conceptions of the social imaginary could lead one to the assumption that Taylor was inspired by Castoriadis, since the latter wrote on that topic as early as 1975.[4] Yet there is no acknowledgment of such a direct inspiration to be found in Taylor's respective writings. It would be very interesting to make a comparative study of the notion "imaginary" used by both authors.[5] All the same

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3 Document in a PDF format can be found at: <www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf> (accessed: 12.10.2012). Castoriadis developed his notion of the imaginary mainly in The Imaginary Institution of Society [Castoriadis 1998].

4 This is when the French original of *The Imaginary Institutions of Society* was published for the first time.

5 Manfred B. Steger, in his article about the possibility of globalization of social imaginaries, mentions along with Taylor's and Castoriadis' conceptions

in this article I am going to concentrate on Taylor's concept of social imaginary presented in his *Modern Social Imaginaries* [Taylor 2004].

Although Taylor does not point to any specific source of inspiration for his conception of social imaginary, he recognizes [Taylor 2004, p. 2] the strong influence of Benedict Anderson's study *Imagined Communities* [Anderson 1991].[6] Benedict's main focus in this work was the origin of nationalism, which he examines using the example of Indochinese countries. This source of inspiration clearly shows Taylor's interest in subjects like national identity, nationalism and alike, which was fueled by his practical engagement in the Quebec debate. In this debate Taylor, being of both francophone and anglophone Quebecois origins, defended the Quebecois culture and special constitutional status but at the same time wanted to foster the further integration of this Province with Canada. The topic of modern identity was central in Taylor's first monumental work *Sources of the Self* [Taylor 1989]. He emphasizes there above all the fact that individual identity depends on goods and values mediated by the community to which the individual belongs. This mediation comes into being indispensably through a widely understood language. The later developed notion of social imaginary helps Taylor to understand and hermeneutically clarify this essential relation between individuals and community, between the individual and wider shared identity.

One of the main interests, if not *the* main one, of Taylor's intellectual activity from *Sources of the Self: Making of the Modern Identity*[7] is Modernity. Nevertheless, in the Gifford Lectures "Living in a Secular Age?" given in Edinburgh in 1999,[8] followed by lectures for the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna and the publication of *The*

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the one conceived by Pierre Bourdieu, for whom the social imaginary "sets the pre-reflexive framework for our daily routines and social repertoires. Structured by social dynamics that produce them while at the same time also structuring those forces, social imaginaries are products of history that 'generate individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history' [Bourdieu 1990]" [Steger 2009].

6   Anderson neither used the expression "imaginary" nor mentioned Castoriadis (or Lacan) in his bibliography.

7   This interest is shown even earlier by his *Hegel and the Modern Society.*

8   As he acknowledges [Taylor 2007, p. ix), from those lectures emerged the major part of *A Secular Age.*

Varieties of Religion Today [Taylor 2002], his main focus became the place of religion and religiosity in modernity. His intellectual efforts in this field were crowned in 2007 by his most recent impressive work *A Secular Age* [Taylor 2007]. A central part of this study [Taylor 2004, p. xi] was expanded and published separately in 2004 as the already mentioned work *Modern Social Imaginaries*. In those most recent publications the concept of social imaginary helps Taylor to construct an account of the modern approach towards religion, religiosity and spirituality. Taylor's notion of social imaginary is well connected to his previous philosophical arguments, especially his whole discussion about legitimate methods in the social sciences. It can be seen as a concrete application and exemplification of the non-objectifying way of proceeding in human sciences, for which he argues in many of his earlier writings.

Social imaginary for Taylor, as was already mentioned above, is not an active cause of changes within society, but rather an important social reality that suffers transformations which on their part can contribute to the changes taking place in society. Thus the exploration of the modern social imaginaries and their transformations is crucial for the understanding of modern society.

It seems that Taylor doesn't like giving concise and precisely elaborated definitions of the notions he uses. He rather prefers to cast light on the concepts approaching them gradually in different ways, looking at them from different angles, and in this way drawing a more complex conception of the respective reality. He shows this attitude when beginning to define his conception of the social imaginary:

> By social imaginary I mean something much broader and deeper than intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations [Taylor 2004, p. 23].

Before entering into the content of the social imaginary, i.e., what is imagined in it, it is worthwhile to explain its nature.

The first sentence from the above paragraph shows clearly Taylor's intention to distinguish the reality which he chose to call social

imaginary from social theory. The term "disengaged mode", used in this sentence, helps us to understand better what this distinction means and why it is so important, because it indicates the proper context for its interpretation. It leads to Taylor's discussion of the so-called epistemological stance [Taylor 1995, p. 1-19]. Thus is the name of the influential tendency in modern sciences that inspired an inadequate approach, Taylor argues, towards human agency and social reality. The birth of modernity was closely related to the rise of modern natural science. At the very heart of these sciences belongs the theory that defines knowledge as the correct representation of an independent reality [Taylor 1995, p. 3].[9]

Despite of the evident differences in their philosophical systems this general representational view of knowledge was shared by Locke as well as Descartes. Knowledge is nothing other than the consequent construction of coherent representation that corresponds to the respective reality. This epistemological conception brings with itself a strong subject-object dualism. For one of its fundamental requirements is objectivity. The subject of knowledge aims to be objective, which means that the reality it is examining must become neutral. Therefore a scientist, in order to perform objectively his scientific activity, has to be as disengaged as is possible from the object of his research. The disengaged subject is one of anthropological beliefs, along with the punctual view of the self and an atomistic construal of society, which are inextricably connected with the epistemological construal [Taylor 1995, p. 7]. They are, according to Taylor, fundamental for the modern vision of the human agent and are related to the powerful modern moral ideal of self-responsibility and freedom understood as self-autonomy.[10]

The possession of this epistemological view derived from the anthropological beliefs mentioned above have led to the fact that objectivity and disengagement have become for many the main criterion to decide whether something is scientific or not. The problem

9   Taylor gives credit to Heidegger as to the one who recognized this general modern epistemological tendency especially in his above mentioned essay *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*.

10   "To be free in the modern sense is to be self-responsible, to rely on your own judgment, to find your purpose in yourself" [Taylor 1995].

is that whereas this scheme applies very well to the natural sciences, which are based on experiment and observation, it is in general inappropriate for the human sciences. Taylor argues in many places that the human sciences cannot and should not be conceived first of all as neutral and objectified. The core of his argumentation is based on the fact that the main object of human sciences is the human being which remains at the same time the subject of scientific activity. This means that the object of knowledge is subjective in its essence and can never be made fully objective. We are not able to objectify our knowledge about human beings as subjects, because we can neither objectify fully our own subjectivity nor perceive objectively in the inner states of other human beings. We can only judge them on the basis of our own experience of ourselves and of what they communicate about their inner experiences compared with their behavior. It means that the "data" examined by human sciences are in major part essentially subjective. Objective knowledge requires that the knowing agent takes a fully disengaged position toward the object he or she is examining in order to achieve Popper's ideal of "knowledge without a subject" [Popper 1972, p. 106-152]. Whereas in the case of examining our subjectivity, disengagement, i.e., taking distance from the object that is to be known, is not the right attitude. A better attitude is that of coming closer, or in this case rather entering deeper and more attentively into the matters concerning ourselves as subjects. An example from our daily experience of sensual perception can be given here.[11] When we have problems with perceiving something properly we do not take distance in order to perceive it better, on the contrary we rather try to examine it from a closer position or listen to it more carefully. We proceed similarly with our inner states. We do not try to distance ourselves from them in order to understand them better, but we try to enter deeper into them in order to develop a clue about them. Here another, completely different attitude is being proposed.

Such an attitude, which is an alternative to the disengaged epistemological stance, is proposed by Taylor following mainly Kant, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger. This new, let us call it a phenomenological attitude, does not attempt to achieve absolutely objective knowledge through prescinding from the subjective

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11   Taylor uses this example in the first part of his *Sources of the Self.*

conditions of our experience of and life in the world. It recognizes that disengaged description

> is a special possibility, realizable only intermittently, of being (*Dasein*) who is always "in" the world in another way, as an agent engaged in realizing a certain form of life. (…) Even in our theoretical stance to the world, we are agents. Even to find out about the world and formulate disinterested pictures, we have to come to grips with it, experiment, set ourselves to observe, control conditions. But in all this, which forms the indispensable basis of theory, we are engaged as agents coping with things. It is clear that we couldn't form disinterested representations any other way [Taylor 1995, p. 11].

Thus the phenomenological knowing activity consists in articulating the conditions of knowledge[12] or conditions of intentionality. These conditions can never be fully objectified, because

> we can't turn the background against which we think into an object for us. The task of reason has to be conceived differently: as that of articulating the background, «disclosing» what it involves. [Taylor 1995, p. 12].

It would be impossible to give here a complete account of the Taylor's argumentation presented so widely for example in *Sources of the Self*. Nonetheless, the above account should be sufficient in order to grasp what is meant by "intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode." An "intellectual scheme" conceived in a "disengaged mode" stands for theory, from which social imaginary should be clearly distinguished, even though they are in close relation to each other. Taylor gives three differences between social imaginary and social theory:

1) Since social imaginary is the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings, it is expressed in images, stories and legends and not in theoretical terms,

2) Theory in its whole extent, is usually accessible to a small scientific minority, whereas social imaginary belongs to large groups of people or even to the whole society,

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12   This formulation goes back to Kant and his *Critique of Pure Reason* [Taylor 1995, p. 10].

3) The social imaginary is a common understanding that underlies social practices and legitimates them [Taylor 2004, p. 23].

This distinction between imaginary and theory can be understood better in light of Taylor's critique of the epistemological construal. Theories are obviously connected to the epistemological stance that has been taken. Taylor does not aim to rule out this way of thinking from the social sciences altogether. His intention is much more that of regaining space in the social sciences for other – phenomenological and hermeneutical – conceptions of knowledge about human and social reality with their own methods. The fact that they don't fulfill the demands of objectivity and disengagement shouldn't disqualify them as being non-scientific. A fixation on objectifying the conception of knowledge is harmful to the social sciences because it leaves out a very important dimension, i.e., the subject's knowledge and experience of itself that are to be taken into account in order to obtain the picture of the human being and society. Both views and their methods therefore should rather complement each other than exclude, as well as rather to remain in a fruitful tension than to aim to eliminate the adversary.

The complementarity of both attitudes is visible in that, what Taylor writes about the relation between social theory and social imaginary. He distinguishes between them as clearly as possible, firstly, as to able to affirm the existence and importance of the latter and to show how they interact with each other. The story that Taylor is telling in *Modern Social Imaginaries* is mainly that of the penetration and transformation of western social imaginary by what he calls the modern idea of moral order [Taylor 2004, p. 28-29]. However, some more insight about social imaginary is needed here, in order to be able to demonstrate better their mutual relation.

Social imaginary is first of all the common understanding that enables people in a particular society to carry out their common practices. "Such understanding is both factual and normative; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with the idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice" [Taylor 2004, p. 24]. To illustrate this, Taylor gives the example of our modern western practice of exercising participatory democracy through general election. We all know basically how it works and what fundamental conditions have to be fulfilled in order

to call an election fully democratic, including those among us who are not involved practically or academically in politics. The normative dimension of this common understanding involves the "ability to recognize ideal cases" [Taylor 2004, p. 24], which in turn requires "some notion of a moral or metaphysical order, in the context of which the norms and ideals make sense" [Taylor 2004, p. 25]. It means that the social imaginary represents a reality that exceeds the immediate background understanding underlying social practices. For just as a given practice presupposes an immediate understanding of this practice, so this immediate understanding wouldn't be possible without:

> a wider grasp of our whole predicament: how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are, how we relate to other groups, and so on. This wider grasp has no clear limits. (...) It is in fact that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have. It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature [Taylor 2004, p. 25].

What is essential about the social imaginary is the fact that it consists of two inseparably combined components: the concrete material social practices, carried out by concrete people in space and time, and the conceptions of those practices [Taylor 2004, p. 31]. Hence the social imaginary has a conceptual side, but it is implicit in it, and the majority of people do not even try to make it explicit. It is social theory that can be clearly distinguished from social practice. Theory is obviously a kind of conceptualization of the background understanding of a social practice. "The understanding implicit in practice stands to social theory in the same relation that my ability to get around the familiar environment stands to a (literal) map of this area" [Taylor 2004, p. 26].

Taylor, as already mentioned earlier, uses his distinction between social theory and social imaginary to deliver a better understanding of the transformations that lead Western society to its modern shape. He conceives this passage to Modernity in general as the process of penetration and transformation of the Western social imaginary through the modern – "Grotian-Lockean" – theory of social order

[Taylor 2004, p. 28].[13] The theory itself had started as an idealization belonging to a minority. This theory began slowly to influence and transform existing social practices and inspire new ones. This process started through improvisation or deliberate action taking place only among a certain strata of society, but was systematically spreading to wider social groups [Taylor 2004, p. 29-30]. Taylor emphasizes that it isn't just a one-sided process, whereby social theory transforms social imaginary with its social practices: "The new practice, with the implicit understanding it generates, can be the basis for modifications of theory, which in turn can inflect practice, and so on" [Taylor 2004, p. 30].

The notion of social imaginary is a good example of the interchange between different disciplines of the social sciences. Such an interchange is possible because there is a profound affinity, which is the consequence of the fact that they represent various approaches to the same human reality. This affinity becomes clearly visible when we consider the methodological problems with precise definitions of the boundaries between the particular social sciences. These boundaries are eventually the effect of agreement among scholars, which can never close themselves up in the space delimited by them. It is not just interesting to see the parallels between the social sciences, but I would risk the theses that it is necessary to sustain the constant interchange between them. The proper understanding of one of the aspects of human reality is only possible when all the other aspects of this reality are accounted for. It means that there is a vital need for the overview reflection, which can be provided only by some kind of philosophical anthropology, of which an excellent example represents Taylor's elaboration of social imaginary.

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13   This order is based mainly on two conceptions: the social contract and natural rights of individuals, which find their influential formulations by Hugo Grotius and John Locke. It is an order of freedom and mutual benefit characterized by Taylor as follows: "(1) the order of mutual benefit holds between individuals (or at least human agents who are independent of larger hierarchical orders); (2) the benefits crucially include life and the means to life, although securing these relates to the practice of virtue; and (3) the order is meant to secure freedom and easily finds expression in terms of rights. To these we can add a fourth point: (4) these rights, this freedom, this mutual benefit is to be secured to all participants equally" [Taylor 2004, p. 21-22].

Such a philosophical anthropology is not possible when, following the demands of epistemological construal, scientific activity is limited to the objectification and representation of the reality, and philosophy to the mere clarification of the language. One of the main consequences of the representational way of thinking is specialization, as Heidegger had shown.[14] Specialization, according to him, leads to the gradually growing isolation of the particular disciplines. Such a development is not good for social sciences, as I mentioned earlier. Taylor's discussion of the epistemological construal provides a reason as to not only why the representational stance is often inadequate in the social sciences, but also why the isolating specialization of the particular disciplines in this area is harmful. The representing and objectifying methods cannot dominate social sciences because of the very nature of their object, which is human. Its essence consists in its subjectivity, and therefore it cannot be fully turned into an object without serious distortion to the knowledge that it has already produced. It is also the nature of a subject that explains why the isolating specialization of different social sciences is not good for them. Every division within the whole human reality, social dimension being an absolutely indispensable part of it, is an artificial intervention for the purposes of knowing. No particular aspect of human reality can be understood properly independently from all its other vital aspects.

The discussion of the epistemological construal and the elaboration of the notion of social imaginary is an important part of Taylor's contribution to the contemporary social sciences. If Taylor is right, than the proper understanding of such realities as identity, Modernity or globalization, wouldn't be possible without a phenomenological and hermeneutical approach. Many recent publications on those subjects, which use the notion of social imaginary, show that a considerable number of members of the scientific community chose this conception of social science.[15]
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14   See the introductory reference to his *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*.

15   A research in a scientific database of articles shows this. I will mention here only two examples of articles about globalization: [Calhoun 2008, p. 105-114], and the already mentioned: [Steger 2009].

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