

New Horizons for Learning and Teaching Economic Sociology in the Modern Higher Education: Theoretical Aspects

Alexander Petrov

Ph. D. (in sociology), professor, Department of sociology, Saint-Petersburg state university, Russia
Saint-Petersburg, 199034, 7-9, Universitetskaya nab; Email: petroval4@yandex.ru

Doi:10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n6s5p24

Abstract

The article is devoted to contemporary issues of learning and teaching economic sociology in higher education. The article draws attention to the theoretical and methodological problems of economic sociology. The author analyzes the current global social issues of economic development. The article outlines the prospects of development of teaching economic sociology. These prospects are related to the inclusion in the structure of the teaching and learning economic sociology of new independent topics. There are the topics that reflect contemporary social aspects of global economic problems. There are the problems of transformation of labor or organizational culture, development and global spread of the environmental ethics, the development of the civil society institutions, creation of lifelong learning society. New horizons of learning and teaching economic sociology appear in theoretical and educational deperiferization of these research topics. Modern economic sociology can continue its development only on the basis of transformation of the traditional theoretical discourse toward problem-oriented researches on global changes in different societies.

Keywords: economic sociology, higher education, modern sociological education

1. Introduction

Economic sociology is one of the most interesting and dynamic branches of contemporary sociological researches. This branch of sociology already has its own history. Perhaps the history of the institutionalization of economic sociology as a university discipline is not very long in different countries of America, Europe, Asia, especially in Russia and China. But economic sociology as the scientific branch has strong theoretical foundations. The scientific and learning structures of modern economic sociology are based on the classical works of Karl Marx's political economy, Max Weber's interpretive sociology, Émile Durkheim's sociological functionalism, Georg Simmel's sociology of exchange, Joseph Schumpeter's socioeconomic institutionalism, Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism and, of course, Karl Polanyi's social criticism of economics. Economic sociology is, theoretically, an interdisciplinary branch of social researches. According to modern classics of economic sociology N. J. Smelser and R. Swedberg this branch is defined as the application of the frames of reference, variables, and explanatory models of sociology to that complex of activities which is concerned with the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of scarce goods and services (Smelser & Swedberg, 2005). Such universal definition and traditional logic mean that the teaching of economic sociology in the universities includes both the study of classical works, fundamental researches of economy and society, contradictions of such interaction, and the study of contemporary problems of the modern postindustrial economic and social transformations. Usually in the teaching process the purely economic issues continually come to the fore. And this is quite understandable and explainable. The production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of goods and services are the economic processes. The economic trend in economic sociology is still an influential (one might even say dominant). Indeed it is really difficult to explain the social nature of these processes, if we rely on the traditional models of teaching economic sociology. Methods of teaching economic sociology affiliated with its basic methodological directions. Therefore, there are a number of methodological limitations. These methodological limitations can be overcome by forming a problem-oriented approach to teaching economic sociology and diversify its research field. Such diversification is possible, provided the structural transformation of teaching and learning in the field of economic sociology. Structural transformation involves the emergence of fundamentally new areas of research and learning in the frameworks economic sociology.

As with any direction of social researches new topics, related to the comprehension of various aspects of the interaction between the economy and society, are added continually to economic sociology. Modern global transformation processes and problems of the economic and social development dictate the need to explore new topics for economic sociology. There are four main topics, which in modern economic sociology are not given enough attention:

1. Transformation of labor or organizational culture under the influence of economic globalization;
2. Socio-economic aspects of the environmental ethics development;
3. Socio-economic problems and barriers to the development of the civil society in different countries;
4. Economic and social aspects of the creation of a learning society (or lifelong learning society).

2. Researches of Labor Culture and Aestheticization of Labor Process

One of these topics is the study of *labor culture*. That is the modern trend in the economic sociology. In economic sociology the studies of labor and organizational culture are in the area of interest sociology of labor, sociology of management, in which labor culture is regarded as one of the factors affecting the productivity of enterprises, as well as the sociology of organizations, where corporate culture is analyzed as a factor in the optimization of formal and informal relations within firms. Feature of all these approaches to the study of corporate culture is the desire to create within them the optimum conditions of the company management through the creation of new process control technologies, including technologies to manipulate intercompany social and economic communications using the labor and organizational culture. In this case, however, is often overlooked necessity of comprehension essence of labor culture as a system of norms, values and rules of conduct, in fact, defining features of social and economic communication within organizations, "embeddedness" of those communications in the overall structure of the socio-economic relations. After all, any organizations are not only closed systems, and experience the powerful, persistent and pervasive impact of different socio-institutional structures that are part of the traditional approaches usually considered only as the external conditions of economic activity. For example, there is the process of social reproduction of the labor resources. And very important factor of this reproduction is the labor culture. The development of the labor relations is always based not only on the development of the means of labor — advanced technology or super-modern equipment. The important conditions for the development of labor relations are the social motivation of labor, human's attitude towards labor and self-realization through the labor activity. All of this is part and parcel of the structure of labor culture and formed by labor aesthetics. Especially as technology could be considered as part of or derivative from the culture and aesthetics of labor, because all human life is labor.

Could we assume that labor (in Adam Smith's interpretation) is the basis of the wealth of nations in the modern times? Yes, we could. However, the basis of the wealth of nations in modern conditions is not just labor, but labor culture and aesthetics. Therefore, labor culture and aesthetics are also the concrete concepts that economic sociology can use to explain the essence of the fundamental contradictions of modern global capitalism.

Labor culture is the main structure of the relations of production (or industrial relations). This structure of social relations appears in the course of the production process. But the labor culture is also an important part of social culture and the process of social reproduction. Social identity is based on labor culture. In addition, the labor culture is very important part of the national culture (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Therefore, the labor culture is not only a universal structure of norms and values that define the quality of the workers, labor communications and the production process. Labor culture not only affects labor productivity. Labor culture also creates the specific cultural and aesthetic conditions for socialization and self-realization. Therefore, we could talk about the special qualities of European, American, Chinese, Russian, Indian and other workers. Social and cultural differences determine labor motivation in circumstances when other forms of motivation are not effective (especially in the context of the modern global economic crisis, the globalization of poverty and the global increase in unemployment and declining wages). Global industrial system effectively applied labor culture as an important new resource for development of modern production, because the labor culture is the last societal resource that has not yet involved in the global production process.

Globalization, or rather, economic globalization is a very complex concept. Globalization can't be considered only one aspect — the progressive process of global unification and integration. Global transformation processes include a variety of contradictions (Petrov, 2009). The main contradiction is between the abstract notions about globalization and the concrete manifestations of global transformations. Commodification of traditional culture destroys the "traditional" labor motivation. Therefore, economic globalization destroys "traditional" labor motivation, because cultural globalization destroys national culture and labor traditions. Economic globalization is constituted by the "traditional" labor culture, but it is gradually destroying such type of culture.

Labor culture as a phenomenon of social consciousness is the system of ideas about the creative self-realization in the working process. It is a system of ideas about the possibility and necessity of transformation of material life in certain socio-historical conditions. As mentioned above, the processes of economic globalization form the adverse socio-historical conditions for self-realization in the ordinary and usual labor. Therefore, to overcome such negative socio-historical conditions of labor is possible through aestheticization of labor process and aestheticization of the concrete

labor. That transforms the culture and aesthetics of labor in the new and highly demanded commodity in the labor market. The modern labor market increasingly needs such workers and farmers, who can creatively take the labor process. And their perception is not dependent on the wage level or quality of life in the country. While preserving the "traditional" aesthetics of labor in modern economic conditions is very difficult task for most workers and farmers.

Thus the main resource in the modern context of global transformations is not just labor, but people's attitudes to labor, willingness to work in the modern social and economic conditions. Therefore, the process of economic globalization can also be seen as dialectically contradictory process aestheticization of labor and exploitation of the specific labor aesthetics. Therefore, economic sociology ought to study labor culture as an important part of the modern global industrial relations.

3. Researches of the Environmental Ethics

The development of the global industry has with serious consequences for the environment. The concept of sustainable development involves active search for solutions to preserve the environment in the conditions of a radical transformation of the global industry. The concept of sustainable development is perhaps the most popular concept of social development amongst politicians and scientists in the late 20th – early 21st centuries. The concept of sustainable development implies economic development of society in harmony with nature. This type of social and economic development requires the effective use the limited resources in the modern (post)industrial system and preserve natural resources for future generations. Sustainable development is such type of development that involves maintaining natural environment, because the destruction of nature means the destruction of society. Harmonization of the relations between the modern society and the nature depends on the *environmental ethics*. Social and economic problems and the specificity of the process of harmonization should be the subject of economic sociology.

The harmonization is defined by the possibility of implementation of environmental ethics of sustainable development. But now we can definitely say that the environmental ethics of sustainable development has significant barriers for the implementation. And these barriers are related primarily to economic factors determining the attitude of modern societies to nature.

The first barrier is a modern anti-environmental economic ethics. Typically, social scientists (especially neoliberal economists) do not regard this factor as a major. Modern economic ethics is the ethics of economic efficiency and unlimited success. Economic efficiency is determined only by low costs and high profit. Moreover, thanks to classical and neoclassical economic theory, economic efficiency is considered identical with social efficiency. The logic is simple: low costs mean big profit, big profit means a rich and prosperous society. The modern production system bases on this logic. But the question arises: who needs the unnecessary economic costs of such system? Unnecessary costs do not need anyone. Most unnecessary costs for this system are the environmental costs of economic activity.

In principle, the whole history of humanity might well be interpreted as a set of adaptation processes of different societies at different times to the natural environment due to degradation of nature, especially in the industrial era (Wallerstein, 2004). The efficiency of this adaptation is directly proportional to the degree of the destructive influence of human activities on the environment. The first environmental laws have appeared in the era of ancient Babylon (the code of Hammurabi) and ancient China. But no laws could change the human attitudes to nature as a limitless source of economic possibilities, possibilities for unlimited consumption. A successful industrial growth is only possible while maintaining the principle of externalization of environmental costs. But we've long since learned that industrial growth is the foundation of social progress.

Next barrier is growing geoeconomic differentiation between countries and societies. More and more experts come to this conclusion. Inequality between countries is widening. The U.S., Western European countries are 100 times richer than Ethiopia, Haiti, Nepal and many other countries now. If we abandon preconceived approaches to the study of poverty, one finds that in reality in the world live more than 4 billion poor people (Birdsall, 2006). The global economic crisis of the late-2000s and the Great Recession only exacerbated this differentiation.

Another barrier is the spread of the global consumer society. Reducing total costs in developed and developing countries due to the externalization of environmental costs stimulates further growth of global consumption. Values of the global consumer society orientate to the total subjection of nature to the interests of comfortable life. Mass culture of the consumer society is opposed to national cultures. The national cultures oriented people to the harmonious interaction with the environment during thousands years. But the mass culture of consumer society suppresses the national cultures and forces the majority of people around the world to follow in their consumer behavior the universal strategy of personal comfort at any cost. And this cost is the degradation of nature.

The great barrier is also the process of transnationalization (Subbotin, 2008). Most experts believe that it would be

impossible to solve environmental problems without the investments and high technologies of the transnational corporations. The transnational corporations are developing around the world new energy-saving and resource-efficient productions, new environmental standards, creating new jobs in poor countries, contribute to increase the financial capacity of such countries in solving environmental problems. Dissemination of environmental standards promotes environmental ethics among national producers and consumers in all countries.

The process of transnationalization hides a set of environmental hazards. There are problem of global placement of polluting industries, problem of hazardous waste, problem of international environmental standards, which eliminate economic competition in the different domestic markets. There is also a danger of freezing of environmental regulation, especially in poor countries. Perhaps it is the most difficult problem. Of course, there are a lot of barriers to the development of environmental ethics for sustainable development. But the economic barriers are the most important under modern conditions. Contemporary economic sociology ought to include the results of such researches in own subject area.

4. Researches of the Socioeconomic Aspects of the Civil Society Development

Global economic transformation processes create not only new opportunities for the development of different countries, not only allow to use more and more effectively the achievements of scientific-technical progress and new forms of labor organization in the national economies. These transformation processes also lead to the aggravation of old and the emergence of new social problems and labor conflicts. Millions of ordinary employees in different countries face daily with various forms of employment discrimination, issues of respect for economic human rights, low level of social protection. *Civil society* is a system of non-governmental organizations, institutions, associations, foundations, and professional associations. Civil society realizes feedback function between the subject and object of public management, between those who make decisions that affect the lives and well-being of majority of citizens, and this majority, thereby correcting the economic policy in order to improve its social efficiency. Thus civil society can influence the processes of economic changes in general as a specific social system, and in particular through specific organizations directly related to the economic life of society (e.g. political movements, social associations, trade unions, etc.). Therefore, socio-economic researches of problems of civil society formation, its impact, including on economic policy, are crucial for understanding the essence and prospects of social development processes. In many countries civil society is treated as the basis of social self-government. In many countries civil society is seen as the basis of social self-government, which is independent of the state or business structures. Such system of the local self-government allows to solve many social problems without state authorities or business. Social efficiency of any economic transformation depends on an adequate perception of the majority of citizens of these changes and the opportunity to have a significant impact on the process of making socially important economic and political decisions. However, citizens can effectively influence government and business in the modern system of social and political communication only if there are developed, effective, popular civil society institutions in the country. But on the path of development of civil society institutions there are many obstacles and problems, e. g. the lack of traditions and culture of civil society, the growth of social differentiation in many countries and low living standards of large groups of citizens, regional and social disparities, financial limits for the formation of independent civil society institutions.

5. Researches of the Lifelong Learning Society

One of the most important aspects of improving the competitiveness of modern companies and national systems of production is the creation of favorable conditions for the formation, reproduction and effective use of the innovative potential of employees. Innovation capacity of labor resources of the national economies and the quality of human capital of particular companies are determined in modern conditions of the global spread of "knowledge economy" by the opportunities for continuous learning or lifelong learning of staff. *Lifelong learning* contributes to improving the competitiveness of the staff at the corporate, national and global labor markets. Why is it so important now? In the modern global economic system part (and often large) value of any goods or services creates through the use of such important production factor as knowledge and experience. Therefore, the organization of continuous training of staff is becoming an effective tool in the competition and strengthening the company's position on the global and local markets. Lifelong learning is gradually becoming not only a part of corporate HR-policy, but also an element of corporate culture. Extensive experience in organizing systems of corporate lifelong learning exists in Japan, South Korea and China. People's commitment for lifelong learning in these countries has a significant impact on the gradual and substantial economic growth of these countries, becoming to some degree the key to economic stability and positive social change in

the Asia-Pacific region.

The exhaustion of opportunities for extensive development of the industry through the inclusion of new non-renewable resources in large quantities has led in the second half of the XX century to the necessity of increasing the competitiveness of national economies and concrete companies at the expense of the resource that "there would be abundance". So the only resource is the corporate human capital. The main resource of companies is the workforce, qualified, experienced, creative staff, and, importantly, loyal to the values of the organizational culture. The professional education, which is paid by the state and companies, has turned from a privilege for the few "white" and "blue" collar workers to a necessity and an integral part of the modern labor activity. The competition between companies, which is aimed at permanent search and attraction of more and better qualified workforce, was gradually transformed into a competition for the improvement of working conditions, improving the efficiency of management of organizational culture. One of the most important values of this culture becomes continuous education of the staff.

The famous American economist J. E. Stiglitz claims, that "citizens in the world's richest countries have come to think of their economies as being based on innovation. But innovation has been part of the developed world's economy for more than two centuries..." And "rising incomes should largely be attributed not to capital accumulation, but to technological progress — to learning how to do things better" (Stiglitz, 2014, p. 2). "To do things better" is necessary to create conditions for constant self-improvement producers. Permanent self-improvement should be an integral part of the economic culture. So lifelong learning is not only a system for improving the competitiveness of corporations and national systems of production, but also the important value of the modern global economic culture. Global spread of learning society's structures could create favourable conditions for improving the quality of human resources, increasing productivity, stimulating innovation. Of course, towards the formation of lifelong learning society there are many problems. For example, the management of modern companies still seek to hire specialists who already have a good education and professional experience. This human resource policy is focused on reducing the costs of staff training in the short term. But such a policy would lead to deterioration in the quality of corporate human capital in the long term. This is a corporate policy creates additional problems for the hiring of young workers. Since labor adaptation requires the creation of a corporate system of continuous education. A barrier to the development of lifelong learning in the global scale is the geoeconomic differentiation between countries.

6. Conclusion

Economic sociology for several decades has a strong position in the structure of the higher University sociological education in different countries. The classical structure of teaching economic sociology includes analysis of sociological theories of production, distribution, exchange and consumption (Smelser, 1994). This methodological approach is now generally accepted in the framework of modern sociological education. Such methodological approach is characterized by the internal logic. But this logic is the logic of classical economic analysis. A similar logic is preserved under the new economic sociology (Radaev, 2005; Economic Sociology: Theory and History, 2012). The only significant difference is that the scope of the economic and sociological analysis is extended by the introduction of the concept of "social networks". Modern economic sociology as a university discipline needs a transformation of the traditional theoretical discourse toward problem-oriented researches on global changes in different societies. The traditional model of research and teaching in economic sociology is not suitable for this purpose. The transformation of the structure of teaching economic sociology is determined by the possibility of the inclusion of new topics. There are the topics that reflect contemporary social aspects of global economic problems. There are the problems of transformation of labor or organizational culture, development and global spread of the environmental ethics, the development of the civil society institutions, creation of lifelong learning society. New horizons of learning and teaching economic sociology appear in theoretical and educational *deperiferization* of these research topics that are weakly interested by representatives of this branch of sociology.

7. Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my Russian, American and Chinese colleagues from the St.-Petersburg state university, Columbia University, Shanghai Jiao Tong university for their valuable ideas, criticism and an opportunity to discuss current international issues of teaching and learning in the field of economic sociology.

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