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The Structural-Genetic Theory Programme as General Theory to Social Sciences

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Abstract

The structural-genetic theory programme is an offshoot of Piagetian theory and Piagetian Cross-Cultural Psychology. It resorts to the application of stage theory to history, that is to parallels between ontogenetic and historical stages. Accordingly, the adolescent stage of formal operations evolved late in history, usually not before the 17th century, making and causing the Age of Enlightenment, with its manifestations: rise of physical sciences, industrial economy, formulation of liberty rights and humanistic philosophy, emergence of classical music, etc. The new theory offers possibilities to unify all human disciplines and social sciences under one common roof as they all need a general theory of the human being which stage theory can provide. They all deal with historical developments such as the history of language, law, sciences, economy, morals, philosophy, arts, worldview, religion, and politics that is shaped and carried by psychogenetic stage developments of humans in history.

I call the program I have developed over the last few decades, which consists of a combination of developmental psychology, sociology and historical disciplines, “structural-genetic theoretical program”. It systematically relates historical developments in people's psychological systems to social transformations. It connects society and man, environment and psyche in a fundamental way.

The forefathers of this program are Enlightenment thinkers such as Condorcet and Voltaire, philosophers such as Hegel and Feuerbach and founding fathers of sociology such as Comte and Spencer. These thinkers already described the fact that the human psyche itself had developed historically, in stages, and that only by taking this fact into account could the historical change in society be explained. Almost all founding fathers of developmental psychology pointed out the parallels between childhood developmental stages and the psychological characteristics of adults in pre-industrial societies. Heinz Werner, for example, published a monograph in 1926 in which he demonstrated these parallels across the entire spectrum of the psyche, perception of reality, thinking and world view. The most important figure in developmental psychology, Jean Piaget, also demonstrated these parallels across the board in a wealth of essays and books written between 1920 and 1980. Piaget showed that the thinking of adults in pre-industrial societies largely corresponds to the second and third stages of human development, while the fourth stage, the adolescent stage of formal operations, only developed historically as a modal stage in the last few centuries. Piagetian cross-cultural psychology has

precisely confirmed these findings of Piaget, Werner and the founding fathers of developmental psychology and sociology in thousands of empirical studies conducted in ethnic groups, milieus and regions around the globe over the last 80 years. The British-Canadian ethnologist Christopher Hallpike published a monograph in 1979 that presented these key findings and conclusions of Piagetian cross-cultural psychology.

More recent sociology also gradually began to grasp the fundamental significance of these findings. In 1968, the well-known Swiss sociologist Jean Ziegler showed in his work "Sociologie et contestation" that the thinking, world view and customs of pre-modern societies stem from the second stage, the pre-operational stage of development, while modern industrial society was linked to the development of the adolescent stage of formal-operational thinking. Jürgen Habermas developed the same idea independently of Ziegler in his 1976 work "Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus" (On the Reconstruction of Historical Materialism). He argued that sociology was dependent on developmental psychology, as only this could explain the historical changes in the psyche and thinking. Without a developmental psychological theory of man, however, one could not explain the historical changes in society, economy, law, politics, morality and world view. As purely sketchy as Ziegler and Habermas' explanations were, they nevertheless identified some very decisive facts.

These considerations were taken further by the Freiburg sociologists Dux and Kälble and by the American historians Weiler, Radding, Ibarra, LePan and Gablik, among others, and planted in new areas. Hallpike already correctly defined the archaic or pre-modern human being as one who shares the pre-operational or concrete-operational stage with the child, but is distinguished from it by knowledge and life experience. However, this insight can be made more precise. An examination of empirical research shows that all the features that characterize the stages of child development are also those that determine the psyche and thinking of archaic humans. There is a complete congruence of psychological characteristics between the two groups. It is therefore not the case that archaic humans only share some characteristics but not others. It is therefore surprising, but nevertheless empirically true, that archaic people, despite their greater life experience compared to children, do not establish the adolescent stage of formal operations that is formed in modern societies between the ages of 12 and 20.

It should be added that in history, especially in ancient intellectual circles and above all in the long transformation phase to industrial society, all possible intermediate stages were realized and that even today the development of stages is still progressing. Furthermore, empirical research has shown that culture and education are the factors that determine which stages populations reach. While it has not yet been possible to prove the influence of racial biology, the influence of culture and socialization has. Consequently, human history can be understood as a helical interaction of cultural achievements, institutions and technologies on the one hand and psychological stages on the other, which have mutually stimulated and promoted each other. Marx's formula of the dialectic of material being and consciousness can thus be filled with new life in Piagetian terms.

I can only list the psychological similarities identified by Piagetian cross-cultural psychology very briefly here. Children and archaic humans share the same structures in logical, physical, social, legal, moral, political and religious thinking, i.e. in the whole range of perception of reality. Both groups do not, for example, master syllogisms and hypothetical-deductive conclusions. Both groups understand physical reality in the same way. Both groups share the same pre-rational

understanding of causality and chance. Both groups understand physical regularities as moral and legal rule-following. Both groups attribute consciousness, thought and personality to forests, waters, mountains, stars, houses, ships and tools. Animistic thinking therefore also sees physical objects as living beings. Both groups believe in ghosts, spirits, witches and wizards. Both groups believe in the power of desire and ritual over reality and nature, i.e. in the power of magic and sorcery. Both groups believe in metamorphosis, i.e. the transformation of an individual into another species or form of being by means of magic. I don't have time to go into these parallels here, but I realize that they are so pervasive that they even encompass the understanding of shadows. They leave no detail out.

These statements already demonstrate the profound difference between archaic and modern humans. Accordingly, developmental psychology provides the key to understanding man in the course of human history and thus also the key to understanding the historical conditionality and the special characteristics of modern man. Accordingly, developmental psychology is nothing other than the psychology of humanity as a whole. Consequently, developmental psychology provides the theory of the human being par excellence. Its information content and explanatory power are greater and more fundamental than other sociological or psychological theories of man, than rational choice or interpretative sociologies, for example. It provides the micro-sociological key to understanding the macro-societal and historical changes in society, economy, culture, science, philosophy, politics, law, morality, religion and art. It is impossible to understand the history of mankind and culture, the emergence of industrial society and the development of the contemporary world without including developmental psychology.

I would first like to demonstrate this using the example of the emergence of science in the 17th century. Piaget himself had shown in several works that the emergence of the natural sciences in the 17th century was the result of the historical evolution of formal operations. It was the overcoming of magical-animistic thinking and the evolution of experimental and hypothetical-deductive thinking that gave rise to the sciences. The cause of the emergence of the sciences therefore lies in the psychogenetic step-by-step development in the sense described.

Developmental psychology also explains key aspects of religious history. I am only taking the phenomena of nature religion and ancestor worship here. Archaic religions also worship mountains, bodies of water, forests, stars etc. as gods and expect help from them. Nature religion is therefore rooted in animistic thinking, i.e. in the pre-operational stage of development. The worship of dead parents and grandparents as gods usually plays an even greater role in archaic religions than the worship of Olympic and nature gods. It has been shown that this attribution of supernatural abilities to parents is a regular tendency in children.

The basic structures of the world-historical development of law can also only be explained using developmental psychology. Developmental psychology provides the key to understanding the world history of procedural and evidentiary law, criminal law and also substantive law. In all archaic societies on all five continents, the ordeal or judgment of God was one of the most important trial and evidence procedures. Who was guilty or innocent depended on the touch of fire, the movement of a bullet, the length of a straw or a duel. It was believed that God and the spirit of the fire or straw involved would make the right judgment about life and death. It has been proven that the belief in the inherent justice of nature, which can be found in all children, forms the basis of these ordeal procedures.

The phenomenon of extending liability beyond actual guilt can also be explained in terms of developmental psychology. People were regularly held responsible for events which they did not cause actually. In developmental psychology, this phenomenon is called objective responsibility, while in legal history it is known as “Erfolgshaftung”. The same applies to the history of criminal law. The younger children are, the more they believe that only harsh punishments are just. The older they get, the more they place punishment and crime in a more balanced relationship. All pre-modern societies, without exception, are characterized by harsh and brutal corporal punishment. Even for minor offenses, delinquents are often subjected to unimaginably cruel punishments. Since the Age of Enlightenment, sadistic criminal law has gradually been replaced by humane criminal law. Accordingly, developmental psychology provides the theoretical explanation for the historical development of the law.

Developmental psychology also explains the moral history of mankind. Empirical research based on Kohlberg has shown that pre-modern cultures generally occupy stages 1 to 2, while stage 4 is the modal stage in industrialized societies. Against this background, phenomena such as cannibalism, sadistic criminal law, arena games, slavery and violent culture are easier to understand. According to George Murdock, 1/3 of pre-modern mankind died as a result of intra-species violence. The Roman arena games are now historically impossible, as they met with extreme resistance due to the sociomoral level that modern humans occupy.

Suzi Gablik and Emma Brunner-Traut have shown that it is developmental psychology that explains the history of painting. The painting of Asia and Europe up to the Renaissance is characterized by certain common features despite the existing differences in style. The picture does not represent a space, but a place. Distances and sizes are unrealistic. There is a lack of spatial depth and perspective. There is no depiction of light and shadow; there is a lack of color saturation, oblique views and foreshortening. The artist paints what he knows about an object, but not what can only be seen from a certain point of view. This phenomenon, known as “intellectual realism”, also characterizes the child's drawing up to the age of nine. The aforementioned characteristics are rooted in the pre-operational topological understanding of space and are therefore paralleled in the child's way of drawing. The refinement of the art of painting in the course of the European modern era results from the establishment of the concrete-operational stage, i.e. from the evolution of the Euclidean and proportional understanding of space, which modern children form after the ninth year.

As you can see, the foundations of the historical development of society, science, religion, law, morality and art can only be explained by drawing on developmental psychology or the facts of human psychogenesis. Developmental psychology does not shed light on one aspect or another of the respective developments, but on their foundations. It not only provides the general micro-sociological basis for sociology, but for all humanities and social sciences. This is because the phenomenon of the psychogenesis of humanity affects all human sciences, from history and ethnology to linguistics and political science. They are all dependent on a fundamental theory of the human being.

Notes

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