



Strong and Weak Intervention

Two Pathways for Sociological Intervention

Shen Yuan

Tsinghua University

abstract: The most important mission of sociology is perhaps to push forward the production of society. Sociologists should not only in its theory, but also in its practice, help resist the pressure from the state and the market, on the one hand, and assist society to emerge and grow, on the other. In facing the problem of the production of society, sociologists must strive for a transition from a sociology of structure to a sociology of action. Faced with a society in which development is unbalanced, we might divide sociological intervention into two types: strong and weak strategies. By incorporating the notions of 'public sociology' and 'liberation sociology', we have gone beyond Touraine's school in several aspects. Our most important task from now on is to combine social practice and social knowledge effectively.

keywords: action ♦ intervention ♦ production of society ♦ structure ♦ Touraine

Production of Society under 'The Third Wave of Marketization'

The course of development of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has had a clear rhythm. During the first 30 years (1949–79) of the PRC, a new system, characterized by the state swallowing up the economy and society, was created and quickly achieved a rudimentary level of industrialization and modernization, despite the scarcity of resources after the Second World War. By contrast, the second 30-year period (1979–present) demonstrated the release of the economy by the state and its rebuilding according to 'market' principles. The general system has already transformed into a market-regulated economy, resulting in a dramatic increase in wealth. Worth noting is that in the last two to three years China has increasingly been sending out signals concerning 'society', such as building

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a 'harmonious society' and so on. Therefore, it is reasonable to predict that a main task of the next stage would be to spend at least 30 years, if not more, releasing 'society' from the state, and reconstituting it according to the principles of 'self-organization'.

We can describe the upcoming task of the third period as the 'production of society'. Unfortunately, at this time, the international scene that we are increasingly involved in is undergoing momentous change. According to Burawoy (2007), this is due to the arrival of the 'third wave of marketization', induced by the alliance of state and market. This alliance has produced differential impacts on societies throughout the civilized world. That is, it tends to crush society in places where it is well developed, and create a hindrance to the 'production of society' where society as a whole has yet to emerge.

Given these circumstances, the most important mission of sociology, as the theoretical expression of society, is perhaps to push forward the 'production of society'. Sociologists should not only in theory, but also in practice, be what Socrates described as a 'midwife', crucial to resisting pressure from the state and the market on the one hand, and assisting society to emerge and grow on the other.

From 'Sociology of Structure' to 'Sociology of Action'

As Confucius said: 'If you want to get the job done, you must first sharpen your tools.' If sociology wants to achieve the task of 'production of society', it must first develop new tools for itself. Generally speaking, in sociology, 'social action' tends to be treated as oppositional to 'structure'. They are always an antinomy. Most sociologists emphasize the role of 'structure' in constraining 'action'. However, at a time when basic institutional arrangements are undergoing huge changes, the emphasis should be placed instead on human subjectivities and their action.

A 'sociology of action' that emphasizes subjectivity is perhaps a useful tool for us to accomplish the historical task of 'production of society'. Our inspiration is first drawn from Alain Touraine's theory and his 'sociological intervention' methods (Touraine, 1977, 1988). On the theoretical level, Touraine made a great effort to reveal the subjectivity of the actor, who is inherently able to create history (historicity); and his methods have changed our understanding of the production channel of sociological knowledge, making it the product of the interaction between actor and researcher.

To be sure, Touraine's theory and methods were indeed developed in the 'ivory tower', scarcely stepping beyond the subjective-objective divide, and therefore, unable to take on the historical task of 'production of society'. For that reason, they should be modified. We might do so

along four dimensions. First, we introduce the 'organic-public sociology' perspective, that is, letting knowledge of sociology go beyond the academic realm so as to foster a dialogue with the public. Second, we draw on the notion of 'liberation sociology' to make sociology stand alongside the subaltern groups, allowing sociological knowledge to become a means for liberation. Third, we replace the concept of 'action' with that of 'practice' to make prominent the aspect of social transformations. Finally, we expand the definition of 'sociological intervention', to be able to deal not only with social movements but also the everyday life of the common people. Through these types of modification, the methods of 'sociological intervention' should become a useful tool for sociologists in our situation to realize the main task of the 'production of society'.

Two Cases of Sociological Intervention

Due to the divide between the urban and rural regions and other constraints in social arrangements in present-day China, the 'production of society' must be an uneven process. Since the Reform in 'the new rich' middle class, and what one would consider as the upper strata of society, 'self-organizing' mechanisms have developed quickly. Yet among the people of the lower class, such as poor peasants, self-organizing mechanisms are difficult to develop, due to the joint oppression of power and capital. As we face these two different groups, we should adjust the levels of sociological intervention: for groups in which the self-organizing mechanisms are more apparent in their development, we can apply Touraine's 'sociological intervention' programmes, which I would label 'weak intervention'. For groups in which self-organizing mechanisms develop more slowly, we should search for a new way to increase the strength of intervention. I call it 'strong intervention'. In what follows, I give two different examples illustrating 'strong' and 'weak intervention'. One is a migrant workers' night school we have created in the rural but industrialized areas of northern China, and the other is a public forum for Beijing citizens' social movements.

Migrant Workers' Night School at Bai Gou: A Practice with 'Strong Intervention'

Bai Gou Township is one of the industrialized regions in a rural area of northern China. The suitcase industry in this region utilizes a type of 'domestic factory' manufacturing system, which displays the following distinctive qualities: (1) the factory is embedded in the farmer's home, therefore production and living space overlap; (2) the labour market is operated mainly through personal ties; (3) the expanded role of family relations conceals the exploitation that occurs during the labour process; (4) the household factory workers from 13 different provinces seldom

interact with one another. These migrants work under harsh conditions, for very low pay and often working overtime. Because they do not understand where their positions lie within the labour production framework, they cannot become part of the 'working class'. Furthermore, they are isolated within the villages and even within the households. They cannot go through legal procedures and national ties to become citizens (with citizenship). If one were to say that the peasantry is considered the helpless part of society, then according to the above description, the migrant workers in the Bai Gou suitcase industry would be considered as 'most helpless individuals among the helpless'.

Because of the double impediment set forth by the village and the household, it is even more difficult for us to enter household factories and make contact with the workers. However, in 2002, an incident involving the death of six young female workers due to benzene poisoning gave us the opportunity to enter these factories. Local government was forced to improve the work conditions in some 3000 household factories, scattered in 33 villages around the township. We invited some doctors from Beijing as volunteers and formed a medical-legal service team to go into the villages and provide free health check-ups for these workers. As the workers congregated around the village committee, waiting for their health inspection, my team members (mostly graduate students from the sociology and law departments from my university) distributed booklets on labour law to them. At the same time, team members lectured about labour law on-site. This was perhaps the first time during 20 years of industrialization that knowledge about labour law had been brought directly to these villages.

From the ground up, we created a migrant workers' night school, furnished with all necessary equipment, such as 20 computers. Every weekend, teachers and graduate students from sociology, law and computer science departments formed a working group to come to this school, providing workers with free courses on labour law, computer science and English. Instructors covered various topics in their courses, such as labour contracts, work time and salary and compensation, and held discussions with workers. These preliminary steps in providing training in computer science and English not only improved their skills set, but most importantly they increased the workers' self-confidence in this age of globalization and high-tech. Since we started the health examination services and distribution of legal information, about 2300 workers have received these services. This number is about one-tenth of all the workers in this township. Through the night school, workers started connecting with each other despite coming from different factories and different provinces, which undoubtedly marked an encouraging beginning of change. Currently, we are planning to build a small library and a small medical

treatment office within the night school as a way to provide better services for workers in order to maintain a long and enduring sociological intervention.

Forums for Urban Movements: A Practice with 'Weak Intervention'

Since 1990, a wave of high-speed urbanization has swept across urban and rural areas of mainland China. Large-scale land seizure, the redistribution of space, as well as social and economic problems caused by the process of urbanization, have resulted in social protests among rural and urban citizens at various levels. These kinds of urban movements represent the few 'strong-society' patterns that have occurred in this era.

Based on the characteristics of the participants in these movements, we divide them into three categories: (1) movements in which peasants in the outskirts of the city defend their land rights; (2) movements in which old city residents defend their rights of residence; and (3) movements in which owners of newly constructed commercial housing defend their property rights. These movements force us to examine how the self-organizing mechanisms are produced within them. Following Touraine's method of 'intervention', we have established seven 'intervention groups', named as the 'Forum for Urban Movements'. The forum regularly invites the leaders and participants of the three kinds movements to attend meetings, to state the problems they face and the goals they hope to accomplish. The scholars that participate in the meetings aid those attending to analyse their different problems and offer suggestions for them to consider. Since 2005–6, these seven intervention groups have organized about 20 meetings, involving more than 250 participants.

Although we have adopted methods of 'weak intervention', we do not rigidly stick with Touraine. For example, our intervention efforts are not limited to within the conference room. Entering actors' communities in order to increase interaction is a frequently used technique by interventionists. Moreover, interventionists are not monopolized by sociologists. Depending on the type of problems, scholars from various fields are invited to participate. They include urban planners, economists, political scientists, legal experts and sociologists – a truly interdisciplinary team. However, sociologists are always the core. Our creative use of Touraine's methods has enabled us to gain an in-depth and systematic understanding of these movements as well as their implications.

Conclusion

In facing the problem of the 'production of society', sociologists should not follow traditional methods of sociology, but instead strive for a transition

from the 'sociology of structure' towards the 'sociology of action'. 'Sociology of action' and its methodology, 'sociological intervention', could be one of the most effective tools for social research. However, facing a society in which development is unbalanced, we might divide 'sociological intervention' into two types: 'strong' and 'weak' strategies. Thus, a basic principle for sociological intervention in transitional China might be: strong society with weak intervention; weak society with strong intervention. By incorporating the notions of 'public sociology' and 'liberation sociology', we have gone beyond Touraine's school in several respects. Perhaps our most important task from now on is to combine social practice and social knowledge together effectively.

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Biographical Note: During the late 1980s and 1990s, Shen Yuan was director of research administration at the Institute of Sociology, CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences). Between 1998 and 2000, he was executive editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Sociological Research*. He has since held the post of associate professor and is currently deputy director at the Department of Sociology, Tsinghua University. Shen Yuan's research focuses on economic sociology, post-communism studies and labour studies. His latest publications include *Market, Class and Society* (Social Sciences Academic Press, 2007) and the articles 'Production of Society' (*Society*, No. 3, 2007) and 'Intervention forte et intervention faible: deux voies d'intervention sociologique' (*Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* CXXII, 2007: 73–104).

Address: Room 202, Xiong Zhixing Building, Tsinghua University, Haidian District, Beijing, China. [email: yuanshen@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn]