Social Construction in the Creation of the Periphery in Africa

By

Olutayo, A.O.

Abstract

Borrowing from other spheres of knowledge, social constructionism seems to have seeped into sociological thinking through micro-sociological theories. Unlike earlier classical and 'modern' sociological theories, micro-sociology tends to circumscribe analysis of human behavior to 'everyday sociology' and the social construction of experiential knowledge. Thus, human behavior is not perceived as being informed by a 'top-bottom' /society/individual but that in which individuals create and re-create their social situation. As such, rather than the colonial creation often adduced for the underdevelopment of Africa, the argument drops in the lap of Africans! What have they made of their independence? The paper argues that the construction of the history of sociology, in its micro-sociological bent, has continued to perpetuate the peripheral status of Africa as it delimits the impact of received knowledge in the reconstructions of African societies. In other words, it is almost inconceivable to understand the cultural creations, or otherwise, without the impact of the 'global' requirements.

Introduction

The history of sociology is, definitely, incomplete without the contributions of the Enlightenment thinkers from whom classical and modern social theorists derived most of their ideas, albeit, with their own new meanings. Interestingly, it was from the Enlightenment thinkers that Africa was incorporated into sociological theory with the social philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and J.J Rousseau deriving their notion of the 'state of nature' (from Africa) against which they theorized about their own societies. Thus began the evolutionary sequence of stages built up by Turgot, Condorcet, and Saint Simon, culminating in the explicit sociology of Auguste Comte (Collins, 1994:18). Since then, the understanding of African societies as a periphery commenced, and persisted in sociological thinking. From the classical to modern theorists, Africa, and in fact all developing nations, are expected to follow the paths of development of Euro-American societies.

With Max Weber’s highly imaginative definition of social action in its subjective interpretation and his concept of life chances developed by Ralf Dahrendorf, the idea of what I call 'everyday sociology' began (olutayo,2001/2002) thus the reconstruction of sociological theory became enriched in symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomетодology and, even, post-modernism. All of these have, in one way or the other, been incorporated into social
constructionism. What becomes obvious from this, somewhat new, sociological thinking is the relocation of the development process in the indigenous societies with a pretense to preclude the 'global' and the 'external' from the explanation of actions and interactions within nation states.

This paper attempts to show how these theories have been applied in the explanation of the development of the peripheral nations and the implications for the history of sociology, in the next three sections. In doing this, the next section presents the application of classical and modern social theory to the explanations and recommendations for development in Africa, as represented in modernization theory. The second section traces the change in this thought process as the underdevelopment/dependency theorists attempted to debunk the veracity of modernization theory. Ironically, this latter attempt, especially with the triumph of capitalism, has been subordinated and social constructionism seems to be holding sway as peripheral nations are being held responsible for their predicaments. Essentially, this is represented by the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) to which most nations of Africa have been subjected. Interestingly, the explanation for this has a place in the history of sociology as 'everyday sociology', especially through social constructionism, came to the fore. The third section concludes the paper as it shows the implications for the history of sociology, especially at the periphery.

Classical and 'Modern' social theory and the peripherization of Africa

As adumbrated above, the unilineal stages of growth/development began with the Enlightenment thinkers and, in spite of the limited knowledge about this continent, classical sociological thinkers like Karl Marx, Max Weber, Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, among others, perceived the European society as the 'ideal' society along which line the developing nations should tow. For instance, one of Marx's popular quotation in the Preface to volume one of Capital is that ‘...the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future’. In the same vein, all the classical sociological theorists succumbed to the IDEA OF PROGRESS as an inevitable history of human societies. This is in spite of the fact that capitalism, which all of them attempted to analyze, carried with it, societal destructions or, at least, fundamental restructuring. Furthermore, though almost all of them subscribed to the importance of history of these advanced societies, the history of the backward nations are almost completely made irrelevant! Indeed, in many cases, they were presented as non-existent.

Ironically, their ideas were popularized with evidence even without knowing much of these latter nations. It was not surprising, therefore, that 'modern' social theorists received wide acclaim from the 1950s still within the generalizing tendency of their ideas. Perhaps the most successful was Talcott Parsons’ systems model emphasising equilibrium, evolutionary universalities and the identification of properties that are common to all societies. Standing on the shoulders of giants like Hobbes, A. Marshall, V. Pareto, E. Durkheim and M. Weber, and with little interest in empiricism, his central concern was how to account for 'smooth', harmonious', and 'orderly' existence of society especially with the situation Perdue (1986) described as the bizzare and the banal comprising of postwar problems of unemployment and inflation superimposed on runaway urbanization amidst other social problems, during which period Parsons was writing. His theory was therefore hinged on value consensus, roles and expectations within physical and social allowance, societal norms regulating human actions in order to ensure conformity through effective socialization and internalization of ‘agreed’ societal ideals. This process is ensured, according to Parsons, in a 'society' which is differentiated in terms of functional prerequisites of the popular AGIL/P system (Parsons, 1977). Except a society is so differentiated, it is not recognized as a society. Consequently, social change is expected to be guarded within societal norms embedded in differentiated social institutions. Within these
differentiated social institutions are pattern variables of behaviour between a 'society' and a 'non-society', so to say.

As such, the 'non-societies' of Africa, the understanding of which had become known through slavery and colonialism and perceived as 'uncivilized' by the slave traders and colonial apologists, have to become so differentiated as in 'societies' of Euro-America. Thus began the process of what Morse et al (1969) referred to as Modernization By Design. Social institutions have to be redesigned in the forms present in colonizing nations. Starting with colonial policies undermining the political institutions prevalent in precolonial societies, the ways of life was restructured such that the pre-existing social structure was modified. Unfortunately, especially with the British indirect rule policy, a position informed by the need to expend as little as possible in the colonies, these restructurings were not fundamental. Since the ultimate aim was to 'civilize' the 'barbarians', as outlined in Lugards, The Dual Mandate... little contact was needed so as not to disrupt the structure, in so far as markets are not hindered and taxes are promptly accounted for by the 'Native Authorities'. Indeed, where these were hindered, direct command of resources, manpower and imposition of martial laws resulted (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indirect_rule accessed 28th February, 2008). Native authorities, who were taught 'civilization', were expected to be loyal to Her Majesty in the process of expropriating their products to Britain, thus the idea of the Bible and the Plough. Over time, the economies of colonized territories were subordinated to their overlords as the former were being 'modernized'-to become like Europeans in the norms governing their total ways of life-even as erstwhile unknown kingship and chieftaincy titles were created and recreated sustaining tyrannical and corrupt governments and promoting divisions in the populations (Crocker, 1936; http://www.stmarys.ca/administration/library/links/shist13/files/collins5.pdf accessed 28th February, 2008); religious institutions were redefined; and the economy restructured to become export dependent. Even, the language of communication was modified (We shall come back to this later).

In short, the problem of development, within the classical and modern social theories, is located in the internal social structures of Africa. And as Rose (1966: 197) posited, sociology provided both the larger hypotheses about the nature of development and of political and economic processes in the emerging nations as well as much of the language of which political scientists and economists conceptualized the problems and the studies of transitional societies, including Africa. The dependency theory, in the history of sociology, gives the obverse side of this picture where the impact of the external/global/developed nations is used to explain the development of underdevelopment. It is to a consideration of this perspective that the paper now turns.

Dependency Theory: The Development of Underdevelopment

Until the 1970s, dependency theory, which started in the late 1950s with the works of Paul Baran in his The Political Economy of Growth, was not recognized in the social sciences. The idea of progress continued to hold sway with systems theory being the most popular in most sociology departments in Africa. By this time (1970s), modern social theory had started to be discredited as the works of Ralf Dahrendorf began to pave way for 'everyday sociology'.

Central to Dahrendorf's argument is the location of the understanding of each social structure within its own boundaries. His position was informed by both his personal experience and that of his nation, Germany, as well as standing on the shoulders of earlier social thinkers (Olutayo 2001/2002). Not only was he born into an influential family, his father was a member of the national parliament in Germany which industrialized from the top, negating the ideas of democracy and development, without any major revolution to disrupt its social structure as experienced in the other parts of Europe. Germany, during this period, did not operate the...
market principle with the government persistently intervening in regulating the economy, a position the German historical school of economics approved of, arguing that each nation defines its own rationality, substituted with ‘nationality’, and based on its internal culture. Thus, specific societal contexts and institutions became important in any analysis rather than a general theory of society. In this wise, development does not evolve in a unilinear direction, which the colonial policy implemented, and obvious in classical and modern social theories.

Around the same time that Dahrendorf’s book, Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society was published, in 1959, a modification of his doctoral thesis of 1952, Ervin Goffman’s-The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life also came out. Interestingly, the historical movement of phenomenology as a philosophical tradition was also launched in the first half of the twentieth century by Husserl, Hiedegger, Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, among others (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003).

Of course, the two World Wars, necessitated by Germany’s challenges of other world powers (Gartmenty and Gay, 1981), within the first four decades of the 20th century, may have informed these new approaches to knowledge, but the struggle for independence in Africa was also its fallout. Expectedly, therefore, these new knowledge, emphasizing particularism rather than generalization, should have been incorporated into the understanding of these new nations (I shall come back to this later). Unfortunately, this was also the Cold War era during which there were contestations about world ideologies, thus the struggle for the survival of Africa still persisted! Consequently, which political and economic knowledge suitable for Africa was in contest and this played itself out in the universites and among the elites in Africa.

As noted by Rose (1966), these elites and university students were being bombarded, daily, with information from both the West and the East, along which lines the ideologies existed. Indeed, he asserted, the urban African, during this period, was likely to be superior in ‘knowledge-ability’ in world political and economic affairs than comparable urban American (or European) since the latter only read information about his/her society whereas the African was exposed to ‘news’ from all parts of the world. Since the African elites’ and university students’ images/orientations were, however, created and whetted by the political and economic social existence in Europe and America, their desires were for good things of life in these societies. It was these desires of the ‘frontiers’ that the world ideologists tapped into leading to the doling out of foreign aids and the emergence of the Debt Squads (Olutayo and Omobowale, 2007; Bradford, S. and Kucinski, B. 1989), rather than a concern for particularistic values in African societies. Again, Rose (1966) has noted that this was connected to the fact that most sociologists who came to Africa were with non-empirical social science orientation trained in continental Europe with heavy bias toward anthropology. It is not therefore surprising that most African universities have department of sociology and anthropology merged together. Ironically, the important sociological contributions that later emerged are based on pre-empting, or is it studying, ‘social problems’, as existed in America, thus demography, innovation/adoption studies, often based in agricultural extension departments, and urban social problems are the foci without attempting to decipher the impact of the World Capitalist System in these emerging nations.

Sociologically, in summary, dependecy theory(ies) that surfaced from the works of Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, Furtado, among others, emphasized the nature of social relations that the World Capitalist System created in the ‘dependent’ nations. Thus, rather than independence, social relations in dependent nations are seen to be ‘unreal’ dictated by the exigencies of the capitalist system within which they subsist as the ‘periphery’, a relationship that permeates the entire social structure. Within this social arrangement, lumpenbourgeoisie/lumpenproletariat exist, the result of whose relationship has been
lumpendevelopment (Frank, 1972). This is because, it is argued, the lumpenbourgeoisie’s interests, as well as the ‘labor aristocrats’, in the periphery, are linked to those of the capitalists in the metropole (and the semi-periphery), thus the former are only concerned with perpetuating capitalism rather being interested in the welfare of the majority of the poor in rural areas which constitutes more than, on the average, 64% (World Bank 2008). Implicitly, therefore, disorder is not to be tolerated with the use of state resources in subordinating any deviance and/or insurrection, or not expected, haven established a social network of dependencies, or what Joseph (1987) referred to as prebendalism. Consequently, rather than development, the nations of Africa are experiencing underdevelopment, not as a result of internally created conditions but due to external factors which structured/s their existence. So, rather than endogenous factors explaining, for instance, the determination of public budget across education stages, as Su (2005) found out, one needs to find out the bases of the group the author defined as the ‘top class’ dominant political power. It is only then that it becomes rational to explain why the class will prefer exclusive participation and large schooling expenditure at higher level at the expense of basic education. Indeed, it is a known fact that the World Bank, which used to favour the latter, shifted gear in the 1990s towards the recognition of higher education. One asks, why this sudden change? What were the effects of earlier policy? Without a consideration of these external factors, the social construction of Africa cannot be easily grasped.

Social Constructionism and Africa

Social constructionism seems to have seeped into sociological thinking through micro-sociological theories which, as alluded to above, began with the works of Ralf Dahrendorf. Unlike earlier classical and modern sociological theories, micro-sociology tends to circumscribe analysis of human behavior to ‘everyday sociology’ and the social construction of experiential knowledge. Thus, human behavior is not perceived as being informed by a ‘top-bottom’/society/individual categorization but that in which individuals create and re-create their social situation. As such, rather than the colonial creation, adduced above, by the underdevelopment/development theorists, the argument drops on the laps of Africans! What have they made of their independence? Thus, even if the independence is, as some are wont to argue, a ‘sham’, or ordinary ‘flag’ rather than genuine, it is disturbing that, after about four decades of independence, the so-called lumpenbourgeoisie/lumpenproletariat have not realized their existential situation and attempt to re-orient their societies. Why have universities not been restructured to train students who are interested in the welfare of the majority of the citizenry, rather of a limited few?

Of course, the prominence of constructionism cannot be traced outside Berger and Luckmann’s most popular books, especially in African universities, The Social Construction of Reality published almost a decade after the works of Dahrendorf and others mentioned above in the ‘everyday sociology’ category. As in everyday sociology, social constructionism presents reality, as not being a social fact, like in classical and modern social theory, but a duality of both individuals and society which is never a conclusive schema, informed by different social contexts. In these contexts, it is asserted, human beings create, and recreate, together, the social world in which they live. As such, individual experiences determine her/his behavior, thus s/he must be held accountable for her/his actions/inactions. These actions/inactions are played out, according to Burr (1995) at the level of language, organized into discourses, conversations, narratives and stories by which we experience our world; meanings emerge from the relations based on the language becoming the accepted version of reality in a particular local context, which are continually being worked out within different historical and cultural contexts. These meanings do change depending on what is acceptable in different contexts, just like in
Goffman’s. Social constructs are, generally, understood, summarily, to be the by-products of choices individuals and societies make by, and for, themselves rather than an effect of an outside ‘will’.

By implication, African societies cannot be dissociated from whatever situation they have found themselves. This is because they also participate in the creation and recreation of their situations. Nonetheless, these situations are not conclusive as the ‘knowledge’, ‘dominant ideology’, and their ‘objective’ positions are only temporary and need to be continually interrogated. What is presented as ‘real’ is only given, depending on who is determining the situation. But is what is presented as ‘real’, though depending on different contexts, not both interpreted by the ‘controlling’/‘dominant’ knowledge system?

Perhaps it will be of immense benefit to re-interrogate colonialism and its consequences for Africa. Central to this re-interrogation are Mudimbe’s (1994; 1988) attempts to show that, in the latter, even the term Africa was an Invention of the colonizing nations, carrying along with it, certain Idea (in the former) which, to all intent and purpose, was fabricated by the people who invented it. These Invention and Idea were created by the colonial anthropologists who laid the foundation of the European world view as the acceptable form of knowledge which was transmitted through the educational institutions, again, created, as an ideological state apparatus, by the colonizing nations (Olutayo, 2002). Indeed, as the British Online Encyclopedia (2007) alluded, even 20th century education in Africa should be treated according to former colonial status, except in some few instances. And, central to the colonial interest was not to ‘educate’ the subject peoples but to extend the language and policies of the colonizer. Most especially through linguistic anthropologists who, in spite of their ‘spectacular ignorance’, ‘kidnapped’ indigenous languages in order to re-present them in acceptable forms to the European audience (Greenblatt, 1991). Ironically, this was the legacy inherited by the elites who were, more or less, ‘privileged’, as they were ‘chosen’, being those who could understand the ways of the colonizers. They could understand because they were taught, especially with the struggle for independence, to ‘take-over’ from where the Europeans left. And it was what they were taught, which they know and which they could give, and that which they have continued to give! Where they attempt to ‘disobey’ they are brought in line either through the engineering of insurrections, in the form of coups, or are sanctioned. The Iraq attack is too obvious as a case in point, and an enough ‘warning’ for any dissenting nation, of Africa especially. Even within tertiary institutions in Africa, unlike in other parts of the world, it is mandatory that lecturers, before they can be promoted, publish in international journals, international journals defined mostly in terms of publishing outside the continent. Ironically, the politics of acceptance of ideas for publication, often defined by the editors of these journals based on their own knowledge and world views, are jettisoned, as if they do not exist. Most especially in the humanities and social sciences, therefore, it is often difficult to, using African experience, debunk the existing world paradigm!

This has been the ‘language’ of development and it is within this understanding that it becomes apposite to discuss the creation and re-creation of behaviour in neo-colonial Africa. This is more so with the, seemingly, ‘forced’ globalizing tendencies imposed on Africa through the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). Central to SAPs is the assumption that the indigenous structural arrangements of Africa explains its underdeveloped status, especially with the ‘overbearing’ or ‘overburdened’ state trying to supply all the needs of its citizenry. As an alternative, the free-market economy should come to the fore with African economies further opening their gates for free trade. In this, supposedly, new arrangement, private organizations should take over the responsibilities of the state since, as in classical, modern and even ‘everyday’ sociology, these individuals are ‘rational’, operating within the norms and values of
the society. And the government is to provide the enabling environment/principles/rules, within which they are to operate. But does the state operate outside global norms? Indeed, what seems to have come out is the adeptness of the state in mimicking the interests of the international organizations and 'selling' such to its citizenry. The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) will suffice as an example in this respect.

The crafting of the NEPAD document was a fall-out of the formation of the African Union (AU) which, in turn, was an attempt to merge, more or less, the political aims of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) with its economic aims located in the Abuja Treaty of African Economic Community (AEC) of May, 1994 (http://www.dfa.gov.za/foreign/Multilateral/africa/oau.htm accessed 7th March, 2008, Africa Union, 2008). Fundamentally, the formation of AU followed, simultaneously, with the need to gear Africa for the challenges of the changing world wherein the Cold War had given way to the free-market economy, driven largely by globalization. Consequently, the rhetorics of colonialism, along with the end of apartheid, had to be driven to the background with the assumption that all structures created by colonialism (and apartheid), and the arguments for and against its impact on African structure had subsided. As such, the aim is to create a 'new relationship of partnership between Africa and the international community, especially the industrialised countries, to overcome the development chasm that has widened over centuries of unequal relations' (NEPAD 2001, p.2). Thus, the overall objective, having identified the historical impoverishment of the continent, is to locate Africa in the global revolution directed mainly by the Information, Communication and Technology (ICT). From here, virtually every statement is couched within the neo-liberal economic framework. In doing this, ironically, the aim, as in the 1960s, is to 'catch up'/‘bridging the divide or gap’ with the industrialised world, even for education! This is in spite of the fact that the document claims that Africans will '...determine (their) own destiny and call on the rest of the world to complete (their) efforts' (NEPAD p.2). In other words, received knowledge will continue to determine what is taught in the educational institutions and its change is to be conditioned by what happens in the developed world.

This is not surprising, when viewed against social constructionism, because even the official languages of the AU, though recognizing African languages, currently uses Arabic, English, French and Portuguese—all colonially inherited. By implication, the union of Africans cannot still be dissociated from their colonial forebears. Each constituent unit has to, first, change its opinion to that understandable, depending on the former colonial overlord’s language. Consequently, even among the indigenous elites, language has to be ’kidnapped’ before development policies can be made and implemented. As such, the limits of social constructionism becomes obvious.

Conclusion

It seems clear, at least in its implication for development in Africa, that as the history of sociology 'pretends' to be changing with different historical epochs, it does not effect any fundamental change in its basis. Though the debate started with the society determining the 'fate' of the individual, thus, perhaps, justifying the unilineal development paradigm recommended, as it were, for African nations, in the World Capitalist System, the recognition of the individual in micro-sociology does not seem to have given much to the individual contribution to the determination of her/his fate. This is because it is always difficult to dissociate the individual from societal norms which govern accepted behaviour. In the definition and redefinition of the situation, sanctions exist which define the limits within which actors can exhibit their behaviour. This dilemma has been well brought out in Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory as he exposes the dialectics of the society and the individual. It is in this
same vein that there is a dialectical relationship between Africa and the world capitalist system within which it operates.

Consequently, social constructionism is inadequate for the understanding of social situations, even at the micro-level at which it is expected to be applicable. The recommendations for development have always not only jettisoned the historico-sociological existence of the people, it has also grafted the histories of other nations on the societies of Africa. In this wise, the historical experiences that took centuries to mature to full grown capitalism, which is itself never static, is expected to materialise in Africa within a few decades, the UN decades of development of the ‘60s and ’70s, later termed ‘lost decades’. Ironically, as the continent prepares itself to ‘catch up’, based on these policy recommendations, new ones are foisted on them as the developed nations experience new political and economic situations. This has come out clearly even in the recently recommended SAPs expected to reduce poverty, the basis for which new ‘regulations’ are being constantly designed and redesigned depending on what has been referred to as contextual experiences. Nonetheless, the basic frameworks/stereotypes already exists to which the nations are expected to adjust. Interestingly, these stereotypes are already being called to question with the financial turmoil in the United States of America. Thus, in a speech by the First Deputy Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2008), the potential transmission channels of contingent risks was acknowledged to reflect the reality of the globally integrated economies. More importantly, is the fact that the IMF now considers the importance of ‘thinking the unthinkable’ rather than the strait-jacketed economic policies. Part of the ‘unthinkable’, especially with the recession looming in the US and its effect on other economies, will be the realization of limited rationale for isolated continents in a globalized economy which micro-sociology, in its social constructionist bent, recommends. In the survey findings of Wakeman-Lynn and Drummond (2008), of the IMF African Department, they alluded to the fact that food prices have been increasing in Sub-Saharan Africa due to high prices for fuel and other commodities. These rises, however, has had impact, the survey showed, on food price-related riots in Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Niger. In the same vein, Goretti and Weisfeld (2008) posited that for the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) to succeed, it has to form an Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union in order to form WAEMU to gain political momentum needed to address the weakness of the current trade regime. Of course, this recommendation is in line with the fact that the nations constituting WAEMU still have long-standing relationship with their former colonial masters, especially the Francophone nations. It is not only the financial aspect of the world economy, therefore, that is integrated but also the social behaviour of the people which the political and economic realities impact upon. As such, the instabilities in developing economies cannot be dissociated from the global arena and so is the behavioural tendencies that respond to these instabilities. Granted, the different nations may respond differently, this also has to be examined against the backdrop of the differential impacts of globalisation in these economies.

By implication, therefore, the history of sociology needs to carry along with it the political and economic as well as psychological and geographic situations affecting behaviour. This is why sociology was once titled the the ‘queen’ of the social sciences. The professionalisation, (is it?), that pigeon-holes knowledge in sociology seems to distill from this advantage thus narrowing the ability to fully grasp the understanding of complex human behaviour. The assumption of rationality that pervades in economic thinking, and which is gradually being realised as ‘incomplete’, should also be noted in sociological analyses as sociologists start to ‘think the unthinkable’- once an important part of social thought recognising non-rationality. Indeed, this was what constituted, and perhaps, still constitutes the foundation of the political economy of, the African social sturcture which modernisation theory attempts to change!
References


Olutayo, A.O.
University of Botswana