



Social Ecological Work and Planning - Remarks on a Social-Ecological Theory of Action (SET)

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses the idea of a social-ecological theory of action in respect to the debate of social work and planning. The line of arguments follows three questions:

1. What is "social health"?
2. How would a holistic view of human and society look like?
3. How is it possible to act in a holistic way?

In the first section the unsatisfactory answers by the current and leading social (and general) theories are presented (Behaviorism, Human Ecology, Systems Theory, Socio-biology). They are criticized because of their reductionist, "two-valued" (Gotthard Günther) logic: right/wrong, yes/no. This logical approach is adequate for the reality of things/objects ("Being"), but not for the social reality.

As an alternative approach it is argued for a social-ecological approach to action and (social) systems, which grounds in the tradition of a "theory of reflection" (G.W.F. Hegel, G. Günther and especially J. Heinrichs). This perspective is based on

- a reconstructive epistemology: reality is explained by the way it is perceived; logically this perspective makes use of the method of "dialectical subsumption" (the part contains the logic of the whole)
- on the distinction between four levels of reflection (1. subject - object/2. reflexive subject/3. subject - subject/4. medial reflection)
- therefore on a distinction between four levels of action (1. adaptive behaviour/2. strategic action/3. communicative action/4. meta-communicative action, respectively: 1. recognition/2. valuation/3. volition/4. action)
- and on the building of systems through action. With respect to society this means the differentiation between: 1. the economical-ecological system/2. the political system/3. the community system and 4. the legitimization system.

This effort towards social-ecological theory tries to offer a logical and structural framework, which differentiates between different logical levels of reality. Beyond the first two levels, which follow a "two-valued"-logic, it makes obvious, that there are levels of reality, which cannot be described in this classical, "Aristotelian" (G. Günther) logic. If they should become empirically studied and (mathematically) formalized, it is only possible by a "more-valued"-logic, which is not yet available for practical use. Research on the basics of a holistic methodology, theory and practice should be supported as well as research, which fosters the holistic ways already existing.

The implications of this social-ecological theory of action for social work and planning are further-more discussed with respect

1. to the idea of "health" as centerpoint of "quality of life", which in the goal of social work and planning: as well-being of the human unity of "Body-Soul-Spirit". This old concept of the human, which has its roots in Chinese philosophy (I Ging), Astrology and other esoteric-spiritual traditions, can be viewed as grounded in a modern logic of reflection. "Health" in this holistic sense is the personal and many-folded balance within and between the levels of life.
2. to a holistic idea of society and its environment: as impossibility to look onto parts of reality without taking into account, that every social phenomena contains the logic of the whole. It means further, that every level of the general "action-system" (T. Par-sons) has its unreducable aspects: You cannot reduce the spiritual-philosophical sphere onto society (or the "material basis"), nor the social level to the sum of individuals, neither society onto nature.
3. to a holistic view onto (political) action: action always happens in "poly-contextuality" (Gotthard Günther). Because we are not yet able to offer adequate (mathematical) formulas for "more-valued" aspects of reality - the social and spiri-tual level we have to foster the "original" and logical ways of societal -, action: communication and meta-communication, social dialogues and spiritual experience. Otherwise the two "lower" levels of societal action will dominate: economic action (exchange-action in the logic of the market) and strategic action (power-action in the logic of the state).

For social work and planning this leads to a perspective, which values the different levels of action and society in their necessity - and in their limits. A "healthy" society with healthy humans cannot be reached by a technological-differentiating attitude neither by a nebulous "holism" in a biologicistic or systemic manner. It needs "integration-by-differentiation" (J. Heinrichs).

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