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CHAPTER FIVE

The sociological re-imagination

The world that was puzzling Durkheim has changed and has become the world puzzling Castells and Appadurai. It has changed constructurally: parts of that old world persist while entirely new parts have entered it, most prominently a new global infrastructure for sociality – the internet – which affects the entire planet, including those segments of it where it is rare or absent. The interplay of these different parts demands a new sociological imagination, and my effort towards that goal was guided by a simple assumption: that a number of insights into contemporary patterns of social interaction can be generalized and provide a sociolinguistically animated re-imagination of the social world, characterized by what Arjun Appadurai called vernacular globalization.

Recall what Appadurai meant by this delicate concept: the fact that globalized societies (and there are none that are not globalized) must be comprehended through the interplay of large and small structures, through disciplined attention to the big translocal things and their interactions with the small local ones – what Arnaut, Karrebæk and Spotti (2017) aptly call the ‘poesis-infrastructures nexus’. This nexus is the intersection of locally contextualized practices of meaning-making with higher-scale conditions for meaning-making. The very object of sociolinguistics, in other words. And what sociolinguistics

contributes to social science is precisely that: a meticulously empirical perspective on this nexus, in which the object is *the nexus itself* and not its – artificially and counterproductively established – ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ dimensions. No contemporary sociolinguist can afford to examine the facts of language in society without considering simultaneously and as part of the same phenomenon, the ‘micro’ facts of situated discourse and their ‘macro’-sociolinguistic conditions of becoming and deployment (cf. Blommaert 2005, 2010). This nexus–object enables us now to propose an empirically grounded (and thus non-speculative and non-‘metaphysical’) sociological re-imagination – an imagery in which ‘the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated’, to repeat C. Wright Mills’s famous words.

Sociolinguistics does, however, more than that. Theories derived from its evidence cannot subscribe to Methodological Individualism (let alone Rational Choice), as I hope to have established in Chapter 3. They are inevitably grounded in that essential and irreducible social dimension of human life: interaction between people in a comprehensible, and therefore shared, meaningful code following a set of grammars as I called it earlier. All the theories I have proposed here, therefore, contradict and invalidate individualistic views of human behaviour, including so-called neoliberal (or ‘postmodern’) views of unconstrained social action and unrestricted agency. If action is interaction, it is only partially open to choice, and it is entirely controlled and constrained by the resources available and accessible to the interlocutors *and* to normative-evaluative uptake by others. Our freedom as social agents, to paraphrase this in a different jargon, is seriously curtailed (and *has* to be) as soon as we try to communicate it to others. It remains perplexing to see that a part of social theory has not come to terms with this elementary – defining – fact of communication.

There will be those who ask ‘where is power in your theories?’ The answer is: everywhere. Sociolinguistic evidence, in my view, compels us to embrace Foucault’s conception of

power as dispersed, norm-focused and capillary, present in every aspect of social behaviour, and crystallized – often in the form of anachronisms (see section 4.8 above) – in contemporary modes of institutional governmentality. The latter produce and reproduce, let us note, significant amounts of infrastructural violence (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012), by policing access to the normative resources that (often tacitly, as in the case of standard forms of language and literacy: Hymes 1996) condition the realization of what Bourdieu (1982) called 'legitimate language'. The same goes for those resources that control, as do the algorithms and 'big data' directing social media traffic, the shaping of communities and the ascribed identities of their members. The indexical-polynomic organization of normativity in communication makes power *total* and *inevitable* across the entire spectre of observation. I believe we need such a view to start addressing – not a minute too soon – the new forms of power, inequality and conflict that now characterize the online–offline world and of which people such as Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, but also Donald Trump, are uncomfortable reminders.

The same answer will be given to those asking 'where are gender, race, class, ethnicity in your approach?' There, too, we must see that such diacritics are *always* present, but rarely *alone*, usually as part of a polynomic and polycentric pattern of social action in which they co-occur with several other identity resources. As I repeatedly underscored, the 'big' sociological category diacritics are not absent (certainly not when we consider institutional governmentality) but they are as a default *chronotopically niched* and most often *complemented* by a very broad range of other identity 'accents'. Whenever specific identity diacritics are isolated in interaction, they are part of a pattern of generic argumentation that demands careful analysis. I have therefore not hocus-pocussed these big diacritics away, obfuscating racism, sexism and other forms of social category abuse. I have given them, I believe, a very precise location in social action enabling extremely accurate analysis, which should protect us from loose generalization or

over-interpretation. For as Dell Hymes rightly proclaimed: 'It is no service to an ethnic group to right the wrong of past exclusion by associating it with shoddy work' (1996: 80).

At the end of the road, the theories I have proposed all revolve around one thing: enabling an accurate description of people's place in society – of who they are, what they are capable of doing, what they effectively do, and what their actions produce in the way of social effect. I consider this a matter of social justice: a science that neglects, marginalizes or dismisses as irrelevant important parts of what people are and do, is a science doomed to generate a deeply flawed image of society. And a governance based on such science is bound to discriminate, incriminate and exclude, which explains my rejection of Rational Choice and related theories as fundamentally flawed instances of sociological imagination, contradicted by all available sociolinguistic evidence. The sociological imagination, we should keep in mind, is a tremendously important and extraordinarily potent political tool; theoretical critique and theoretical reconstruction, therefore, are exercises of substantial 'applied' relevance.