

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LEO M. SEMASHKO, *Tetrasociology: Responses to Challenges*. St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg State Technical University. 2002, 158 p. (Introduction by John Rex; Foreword by Dr. Bernd Hornung)

TetraSociology: Responses to Challenges opens up for contemporary sociologists a window that looks out onto Enlightenment ideals that not only persist but are being carried much further by at least one contemporary Russian sociologist. It is indeed hard to imagine how those ideals could in fact be extended as far as its author takes them, given his experiences of attempting to keep his sociological ideas and ideals alive in a dictatorship for decades, and given the economic problems faced by academics in contemporary Russia. Yet there are parallels to this outside of Russia, for we might also wonder how Western sociologists like C. Wright Mills and Alvin Gouldner managed to stay with those same Enlightenment ideals despite the horrors of the twentieth century and the resulting pessimism and cynicism inside and outside of the academic world.

Imagine, along with Professor Semashko, a world that is moving toward a new Age of Enlightenment where globalization, multiculturalism and the internet are working to yield ever more harmony among all the peoples of the world. This is not a postmodern world with a pessimistic view of the potential of the scientific method. Rather, it is a "postpluralistic" world which follows postmodernism in its openness to complexity and change. But it is optimistic about the possibilities of the scientific method for understanding complexity and change by integrating elements of many theories, versus maintaining the isolation of diverse theories which fail to communicate with each other. Just as people in that world are learning to interact so as to pay full attention to others' ideas and ultimate worth--and even to create a "dialogue among civilizations"--so are social scientists learning to integrate the work of those who have preceded them so as to follow scientific ideals for a social science that cumulates rapidly.

Professor Semashko does not assume that such a world emerges all by itself, for he follows Auguste Comte in seeing sociologists as working to bring it about by addressing modern problems in a highly effective manner. He coins the term "TetraSociology" to refer to the kind of sociology which can accomplish this, a discipline that has a breadth similar to what Mills called for in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) along with the reflexivity that Gouldner called for in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970). That breadth is based on Semashko's own background as a philosopher no less than a sociologist, including a metaphysical and

epistemological stance along with his theoretical and applied orientations. And just as modern sociologists have emphasized the nature and extraordinary impact of language on shaping the individual and society, so does Semashko attempt to use that impact by coining many new concepts, such as "tetrasociology."

To illustrate Semashko's approach, his metaphysics is oriented to three dimensions of social space and one dimension of social time, corresponding to the three dimensions of physical space and one dimension of physical time. Just as Einstein related space and time, so does Semashko see the linkage between social space and social time as crucial. In this way, he alerts us to the importance of probing into our own metaphysical assumptions. What is our own worldview or *Weltanschauung*, a concept that may appear to be outdated to modern sociological eyes? What impact does that worldview have on every stage of the research process? Why don't we social scientists devote the attention to this topic that it deserves instead of continuing to rule out metaphysics and philosophy from the realm of sociology?

As for the relationship between social space and social time, Semashko is telling us of the centrality of the latter if we hope to understand the former, and he is indirectly criticizing the relatively static nature of the social sciences. This is arguably a frontier of our discipline. At the macro level this is illustrated by the efforts by comparative-historical sociologists to face up to the complexity of history, carrying further the more simplistic orientations of figures such as Toynbee, Spencer, and Sorokin. At the micro level it is illustrated by the work of symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists and rational-choice theorists who attempt to probe deeply into the scene, capturing changes in emotions and speech from one moment to the next with audio-visual technology. Metaphorically, I am reminded here of Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* (1952), a science-fiction story written in the 1880s, where a three-dimensional sphere is able to see into all of Flatland's two-dimensional houses and inhabitants by hovering over them. Analogously, we require a four-dimensional perspective that includes social time to see into our own nature, probing into the history of the individual and society in order to understand present-day behavior. Here we have Semashko carrying further the long-term historical orientation illustrated by Marx, extending it to the momentary scene.

If we turn to Semashko's epistemology, we find--implicitly--a profound critique of our modern approach to the scientific method. His postpluralism calls for the ability of the social scientist to make good use of all of the relevant theoretical ideas from the past in investigating any given problem. Yet sociologists are divided into numerous specialized areas and literally hundreds of subspecialties, and they generally fail to communicate across specialized and subspecialized lines. This is illustrated by the division of the American Sociological Association into no fewer than 42 distinct Sections with their own organizations and immunity to outside ideas. By contrast, Semashko's ideas bridge many specialties, as called for in Bernard Phillips' *Beyond Sociology's Tower of Babel: Reconstructing the*

Scientific Method (2001) and the edited volume *Toward a Sociological Imagination: Bridging Specialized Fields* (2002).

There are many questions which Semashko raises. Viewing *TetraSociology* from a theoretical and applied perspective, why does social stratification persist throughout society, by contrast with the cultural value of equality? What are the forces which are presently yielding sexism, ageism, classism, and ethnocentrism? Why is Durkheim's "normal division of labor"--with the worker's awareness of his or her contribution to society as a whole--in fact an "abnormal division of labor"? Given what we have experienced in the 20th and early 21st centuries, is a "new Age of Enlightenment" a realistic possibility? How would Semashko analyze any particular social or theoretical problem in some detail and come up with insights which go beyond what we have learned from the contemporary sociological literature?

Professor Semashko comes out of modern Russia with ideas that are in some ways more revolutionary than those of Karl Marx. Just as Toynbee saw human history in terms of challenge and response, he attempts to respond to accelerating modern problems by pointing toward the possibility of a new Age of Enlightenment. He suggests nothing less than changes in the metaphysical stance of modern society, based on the potential weight of language. And he goes back to what may well prove to be the future of social science: the ideals of the scientific method and the enormous breadth of the classical sociologists. Yet, like Moses, he may have brought us to the Promised Land yet be unable to enter it himself. For he fails to demonstrate how his broad metaphysical, epistemological, theoretical and applied approach to social science yields deeper insights into any major social or theoretical problem. Perhaps if we contemporary sociologists can learn from Semashko to rekindle the fire of ideals that gave rise to the Enlightenment and the origins of sociology, a fire that we desperately require in these times of troubles, then we may learn to enter that Promised Land.

[Book Reviewer's notation: given the dearth of knowledge about Russian sociology, I accepted this review as a means of stimulating international awareness. Readers may want to correspond with Professor Semashko at < semashko@mail.admiral.ru >]

Bernard Phillips

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