

# Some Elements of a Cultural Theory of Social Change

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**Abstract**—The present paper attempts to lay the foundations of a cultural approach for the study of social change, in which change is understood as a result of a conflict of self-interpretations between different groups or spheres in a society. This cultural approach seems to be particularly useful in explaining the emergence of social movements, which always presuppose a clash of views, say, between the aspirations of the people and the official doctrine of the state, just to mention the most typical case. The concepts and methodological principles offered here owe a great debt to the work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor – although he never clearly spelled out a meta-theory on change. The paper will then try to show in what would consist such a Taylorian theory of social change, and this we do not only by reconstructing Taylor’s views on this issue, but also through a critical examination of range of key assumptions found both in mainstream social science and, more specifically, in existing theories of social change.

**Index Terms**—Cultural identities, identity crisis, self-interpretation, social change, social imaginary, social movements, Charles Taylor

## I. INTRODUCTION

Western societies operate on the basis of a concrete set of self-understandings and social imaginaries which make possible their democratic practices, market exchanges, as well as the rest of their social institutions and collective ways of doing. These common self-interpretations are so to speak ‘embodied’ in the structure of these societies. But they can be then articulated thus becoming political doctrines, as we find them laid down in the constitution of a country. A particular political culture, that is, a language and a set of practices defining personhood and societal order, finds its expression in the constitutional principles that a nation gives to itself. But there are also other places to look at. Common self-understandings appear as well under the form of social movements of whatever kind. These movements are ‘social’ in the sense that all of their members share a *common* (political) identity, which in turn makes possible their constitution into a collective agent. Some of these groups fail to articulate a coherent political agenda, but a common understanding must exist (as opposed to mere convergence of interests) in order for us to speak of social movements at all. In Western societies, the history of modern political and

social struggles, say, from the early XIX century onwards shows the crucial role social movements have played in challenging the state in a more or less radical way –with more or less revolutionary consequences. They are key agents of change.

The present article argues for a new theoretical and methodological approach for the study of social change, one which understands change as the result of conflicting common self-interpretations and social imaginaries, such as those we find historically materialized in the tensions between citizens aspirations and the official ideology of the government in power, leading to all sorts of political movements. My claim is that existing theories of social change, as we find them in sociology and other social disciplines, fall short of a satisfactory explanation of change when it comes to understand the rise and transformation of collective identities; that in one way or another, the assumptions on which these theories rely necessarily lead to reductionist or distorted accounts of what I term here *cultural* change. In what follows, I attempt at a critical examination of some of these assumptions, from which I hope to draw the basic principles for a more appropriate conceptualization of change.

## II. SOCIAL SCIENCE TODAY: THE SPECTER OF ATOMISM

It is today widely acknowledged within the various social science disciplines that no social reality can be properly studied in abstraction from its constitutive self-interpretations [1]-[2]. This is the conviction behind what has come to be known as ‘interpretive social science’, a general mental pattern for guiding research, which has been endorsed by such influential and diverse authors as Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, and Michael Walzer, among others. According to this perspective, changes taking place in social practices, institutions or identities always imply a transformation in their constitutive self-interpretations, even in those cases where these transformations are triggered by external (non-interpretive) factors such as ecological catastrophes, wars, demographic changes or the introduction of a new technology in a given society. These kinds of external factors can certainly bring about deep structural changes but its effects will be mediated in every case by modifications of the self-interpretations operating in those social structures. The point is that despite this emphasis given to interpretation and meaning, the way social research is carried out today exhibits the adherence to an unhealthy individualistic credo: that of atomism and its correspondent reliance on methodological individualism. The atomistic dictum is to be found even in disciplines that concern

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themselves with collective phenomena, as is the case with sociology, political science, and social psychology. Atomism is without doubt one of the founding assumptions of the social sciences, a powerful set of ontological views and methodological prescriptions that still today dominates the way social inquiry is conducted. Perhaps this is the right place to start our analysis.

The problem with the mainstream of social inquiry is that while accounting for beliefs and values, considers them as a mere subjective events taking place in the minds of individuals. What considerations lead into this atomistic view? And, what is wrong with it (if anything)? This influential methodological principle draws, as Charles Taylor would argue, on the atomism that came with the development of modern natural science and which was introduced by Hobbes into the sciences of man [3]. The whole must be understood in terms of the parts that compose it, and since societies are made up of individuals, social structures and conditions should be accounted for in terms of the properties of these individuals. At first look the idea of atomism appears as a most natural and obvious stand point, for isn't the individual human being the only one who can be said to think and act? It is precisely from the interaction of individuals –so goes the argument— that society emerges with its practices, norms, traditions, etc. Under this impression, one is tempted to discard any kind of holistic approach that seeks in a supra-individual level the key terms for an explanation of society.

The crucial argument against atomism passes through an examination of the peculiar nature of what Taylor calls 'meaning events'. The core of the argument is already found in Wittgenstein. The point of departure is the consideration that social practices, norms, traditions and the like require human beings capable of thought— something which the methodological individualist would instantly agree to. But what is the nature of these thoughts? In examining language, Wittgenstein was able to show that any linguistic item (a word or concept, a sentence or judgment) has a meaning only in virtue of an already existing language, with which this particular item is internally connected and against which a simple word acquires a definite signification. Any instance of rule-governed human behavior, such as a game, moves in a domain of validity where 'the part' (an action) is determined by the place that it occupies within 'the whole' (a language, a set of rules). Taylor applies this insight to meaningful human behavior in general. "Thoughts exist as it were in the dimension of meaning and require a background of available meanings in order to be the thoughts that they are" [3]. The example given by Taylor is the hypothetic case where a Neolithic man praises his lover of being 'sophisticated' in the way she behaves. But if it's true what we know now of the Neolithic farmers in upper Syria, such a romantic scene could have never taken place. The available culture and language in those ancient times did not possess anything resembling the idea of 'sophistication' and therefore such a talk makes no sense within this particular cultural community. 'Meaning events' are according to Taylor those which can only be intelligible against a meaning background, a language. And this is what ultimately rules out methodological individualism.

As meaning events, human thoughts and actions are necessarily embedded in a society, which should be seen in turn as the locus of a given linguistic and cultural community. There can be no individual action without the context of a society so understood. And since methodological individualism ignores the latter (in its attempt to decompose macro structures into individual acts) it cannot deliver a satisfactory explanation of social life; it will always provide a partial or reductionist picture of it.

### III. MOVING BEYOND ATOMISM: INTER-SUBJECTIVE MEANINGS

The previous considerations lead to the idea that society is an undecomposable unit of meaning. Now, what does it mean for a social scientist to approach society as a whole, i.e. in a holistic fashion?

An atomist political scientist might be studying, for example, the observed correlation between certain ideological beliefs and certain voting practices within a given society or subgroup of it. In other words, he is interested in the relation between some *subjective* meanings and some objective institutional practice. We are confronting here a set of ontological and methodological assumptions that tell us that beliefs, attitudes, and values will always be those of a particular individual or subject. What is forever out of consideration in this view is what Taylor calls inter-subjective meanings, something like objective meanings [4].

But if the arguments developed in this paper are right, then what an atomist calls 'subjective meanings' are not real meaning events in the sense defined above, precisely because they are *defined in isolation from the socio-cultural context* in which they arise. As soon as we see the impossibility of this, we are drawn to search for the correspondent background of meanings as the only way to understand the action/practice under study. We seek to identify the historically and geographically bounded set of inter-subjective meanings –a specific culture— within which particular actions acquire a value that otherwise would not have. Inter-subjective meanings are not only available in the (articulate) form of the political constitution of a state or other legal documents, but are operative in all its different institutions and practices; they are, so to speak, 'embodied' in the structure of a society. Social movements are just another concrete example of embodied collective self-understandings. And it is only from the basis of an abstract or disembodied conception of meaning that atomism can appear as a convincing theory. Concrete or embodied meaning has, on the contrary, always a social and objective dimension. "The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action" [4]. Inter-subjective meanings in this sense are not the same thing as consensus, for the simple reason that the latter presupposes the former. In order to agree or disagree on something, both parties need first to understand what they are discussing about, what is the issue at stake: they first need to share a web of inter-subjective

understandings, norms, values, and the like.

But now the limits of mainstream social sciences should be visible. Because of the prevalence of an atomist methodological dictum known as methodological individualism, social scientists in the great majority of the cases cannot offer any satisfactory account of inter-subjective meanings. Cultural identities so understood and their processes of transformation over time stay forever out of reach.

#### IV. TOWARDS A HOLISTIC CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The project for holistic conceptualization of social and cultural change is not based on the conviction that atomistic-empirical social sciences, as we know them today, are globally wrong. The problem only begins when this approach is claimed to explain the whole of society. But there are certain aspects of it –individual and collective identities, cultural and social transformation processes—that are almost impossible to be made sense of from the individualistic perspective.

A useful concept to approach holistically the phenomenon of change is that of ‘social imaginary’, recently used by Taylor to characterize “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations... the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” [5]. Taylor’s main thesis is that our modern Western world is the result of a series of transformations of the social imaginary of pre-modern Europe and North America. Social change is thus inextricably linked to a mutation of the social imaginary. Of course this takes time. It’s a long process where new practices (or modifications of old ones) slowly or disruptively develop among certain groups of the population, but it also can mean that these developments in turn lead to the constitution of new social imaginaries. The three forms of social self-understandings that characterize modernity (as a consequence of the transformations of the social imaginary) are, according to Taylor, the economy, the public sphere, and the practices of democratic self-rule. We find here a nice framework for the identification and description of inter-subjective meanings in order to understand the rise and transformation of collective identities.

The social imaginary is something boarder and deeper than a political *idea*, a social *theory*, is more than a *mere* common understanding. It designates the way (a large group of) ordinary people *imagine* their social surroundings, which allows them to make sense of the practices they posses. The social imaginary is the key element in a cultural theory of social change. A new idea or theory can only make its way into history “in that the people (or its active segments) share a social imaginary... that includes ways of realizing the new theory” [5].

Now what changes motivated the rise of the modern social imaginary? Although the analysis undertaken by Taylor does not claim to provide a clearly cut causal explanation of it, he does make clear that his project can neither be classified as

idealist nor as materialist – we are here faced rather with a multi-level theory of change. Thus, in accounting for the rise of the economy as a crucial feature of our modern world, Taylor points to at least three underlying types of historical changes: economic ones (the increasing number of business classes, merchants, and later manufacturers in Holland and England); political (the new social order requiring ordered and disciplined economic life for the masses, in some parts of Europe and in North-America); and purely spiritual changes (the rejection of the Catholic idea of higher vocations that led to the Calvinist sanctification of ordinary life – of production and reproduction). But despite Taylor’s acknowledgement of multiple factors operating behind the rise of modernity, he is not explicit in accounting for the dynamics of social change in general. How does change start?

#### V. THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL CHANGE

An important complement to Taylor’s reflections may be found in Hartmut Rosa’s formal theory of social change [6]. Building on Taylor and other authors, he sees change as occurring between four mutually interdependent ‘levels of self-interpretation’. Michael Walzer had already identified three possible locations of the significant interpretations of a society, namely, (1) explicit self-interpretations in the form of law documents, literature, and theories, (2) institutions and social practices, and (3) the thoughts and beliefs people have [7]-[8]. To these three, Rosa adds a fourth locus, namely, (4) the body-practices, habits, and feelings of individuals. There is here a relation of interdependence and well as of partial autonomy between these four levels of meaning, where (1) and (3) refer to ‘explicit’ or reflective forms of self-interpretations, and (2) and (4) go for ‘implicit’ or embodied meanings. The main insight behind this theory is that “institutions and theories, or implicit and explicit self-understandings, can easily get into conflict and mutual tensions that put pressure for change on one or both of them” [6]. In other words, this formalist theory explains the dynamics of social change using a criterion of consistency. It avoids the mistake of advocating for a substantive mono-causal explanation, as we find in classical theories of social change, and focuses only in the possible tensions or discrepancies that arise between any of the different spheres. Of course, the same relationship holds for the individual level, (3) and (4), but one should not forget –as we showed in the previous sections— that individual self-interpretations are always embedded in a social context, or as Taylor puts it elsewhere “in a web of interlocution” [9].

Following the same intuition, I want to argue that the causes of change are to be found at the level of a society’s *self-interpretations* and the *degree of discrepancy* or *coherence* among them – in opposition to traditional approaches which view the causes of change in interests and inequalities (say, in a neo-Marxist line of thought) or the introduction of new technologies into a society (as some exogenous accounts of change would have it). Societal self-interpretations are more or less coherent systems of beliefs whose contents cannot be simply *deduced* from the structure of the societal system in which they occur and from the position of the actor within it. (This ‘autonomy’ and

inherent power of moral ideals is an issue I will try to elaborate below).

There is a threefold meaning attached to the notion of a 'self-interpretation' of decisive importance: it is an interpretation/definition i) *about* the self/subject concerned, ii) *constitutive of* the self (in the sense that it shapes his/her identity), but more importantly, the interpretation here involved is one that is iii) *provided by* the self. In other words, a cultural explanation of change in our sense is not based on a third person approach, on exterior factors accounting for individual/collective change – as we find for example in the resource mobilization theory [10]-[11] or, in a different way, in the political process model [12] when it comes to explaining the emergence of social movements. We are primarily interested in *self* understandings, expectations, and values of the people concerned; we are interested in how people *imagine* their social life. This is why we think that the concept of 'social imaginary' –introduced in the previous section— plays a decisive role in any explanation of socio-political change.

Let me briefly introduce the basic insight behind this approach by reference to the apparition of social movements in general. To this end, we need first to distinguish between two kinds of *cultural* change. In the strong sense, a cultural change means a radical transformation of the way a society is conceived as a whole, the emergence of a new horizon of values, norms and practices. A change of this magnitude can only occur when the *background understanding* on which a society is based suffers a complete modification. This is the interpretation of Charles Taylor in relation to the emergence of what he calls the 'modern identity', a whole new set of self-understandings at the basis of modern western societies [9]. The point is here that modernity cannot simply be explained by the decline of religious, metaphysical, communitarian *beliefs* or explicit doctrines; the change involved here affects rather the main assumptions, the underlying convictions against which those beliefs make the sense they have: a pre-modern background understanding was progressively replaced by a brand new vision on personhood, society, nature, the good, and time.

But there is a second kind of cultural change, one that arises from the intrinsic contradictions that characterize modern societies. In the previously quoted book entitled *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor argues that modern society is rooted fundamentally on the ideals and realities of democratic self-rule and market exchange, but affirms that the modern culture also permits the creation of a new 'space' where individuals can come together for debating and exchanging ideas: the public sphere. Now, it is in this public sphere –I argue—where social movements can emerge, movements which are not only constituted independently from the state but usually define their agendas in opposition to the latter. This is a clear example of the inherent tension that characterizes modern societies, which would lead sooner or later –following the logic we are presenting here—to internal social changes. And this is the kind of change we are primarily interested in.

If the first kind of change (let's call it *foundational*) was defined by the emergence of a new background or repertory of possibilities, the second type of transformation (an

*intrinsic* type of change) issues from tensions to be found *within* the modern repertoire.<sup>1</sup> The public sphere allows for the formation of independent views, eventually becoming a collective self-interpretation, a new political aspiration, grasping the collective imaginary, which in turn may lead to challenging the political ideology of the government. The more the perceived 'distance' between citizen aspirations and official politics, the greater becomes the probability for the emergence of social movements and social changes.

## VI. A NOTE ON METHOD

Before proceeding with the analysis, a brief reflection on method is in order. It should be clear at this point that the whole project of a cultural theory of change has a strong historical bent. To understand a political crisis means first of all to understand the historical context in which that phenomenon arose; there can be no *a priori* answers, as we find them, for instance, in functionalist accounts of change. For example, one cannot make sense of the current waves of social movements in Chile without a detailed study of the constitutional and political history of this country. Such a study would reveal that Chile is a country especially prone to develop crises of legitimacy due to the coexistence of two markedly different democratic ideals shaping its political imaginary: one republican (experiencing various phases since the independence times), the other (neo) liberal [13]. The 2011 student protests in particular are to be understood as the return of a politics inspired by (a new interpretation of) republican ideals in reaction to three decades of market-oriented policies and the privatization of the education system.<sup>2</sup>

For this sort of research, a wide range of qualitative tools seem especially suited. Following Foucault's famous 'genealogical' style of investigations, a method usually utilized for historical reconstructions of the kind we just mentioned is the one generally known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which aims to show how ideas, discourses or practices came into being, and how they shape and limit what people do now. In addition to this, content and thematic analyses of the political constitution and other legal documents of a country permit to elucidate the character of dominant ideologies and doctrines. All these methodological tools are helpful in uncovering the tensions between self-interpretation, which are always at the basis of these crises as we have suggested.

Despite the emphasis given to self-interpretations, that is, to the particular historical circumstances of a crisis/change in the words of the people themselves, our approach does not follow a simple inductive methodology, in the spirit of the so called grounded theory (at least in a vulgar variant). This is a crucial difference. The aim is not so much to develop a theoretical construct of the phenomenon being investigated

<sup>1</sup> I recognize that the distinction between 'foundational' and 'intrinsic' change is problematic, and I still do not have a solution to this problem. Hartmut Rosa, for example, argues that change in general can be explained by tensions occurring between any of his 'four levels of self-interpretation'; in this view, all change is intrinsic change.

<sup>2</sup> The author is presently conducting this study case as part of his PhD thesis.

that is faithful to the actual lived experience of the people being studied, but rather exploring cases to see whether our theory helps us understand the object of inquiry. The cultural researcher is neither interested in testing a particular prediction stemming from an existing theory (deduction) nor does he intend to produce a construct out of empirical data (induction) but tries rather to find the best fit between theory and data (abduction). In recent years, David Hiles [14] has developed a useful categorization of these three different logics of inquiry, calling them respectively ‘theory-driven’, ‘data-driven’ and ‘explanation-driven’, the last one being the type of inquiry we are interested in.

But it is a *phenomenological* explanation. “What we need to *explain* is people living their lives; the terms in which they cannot avoid living them cannot be removed from the explanandum, unless we can propose other terms in which they could live them more clairvoyantly” [9]. The ‘best account principle’ implicit here reposes ultimately in a criterion of plausibility; it is a hermeneutical exercise that bears always the character of a provisional explanation, an explanation can later be challenged, corrected, improved by a later interpretation. At any given moment, the best interpretation possible of a phenomenon is that which succeeds in making sense of the phenomenon in question to a degree that alternative accounts do not achieve. In this interpretive enterprise many different theories could, indeed should be utilized in order to enhance our understanding of the reality under study. Theory is always in the service of understanding reality, and never an end in itself. Usually the sensible strategy that follows the researcher in sticking to his third type of inquiry is the selection of a case study, in which the phenomenon can be intensely studied.

## VII. THE DRIVING FORCE OF MORAL IDEALS

In contrast to a range of theories of change from Marx to Daniel Bell that tend to understand values and ideals as co-products of socio-economic developments, this cultural perspective recognizes the *inherent power of values and moral ideals* and their historical role in the shaping of our social world, most famously articulated by Max Weber in his account of the protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism, a line of thought that has somehow survive until today, for example, in the work of the political scientist Samuel Huntington and the psychological theorist David C. McClelland. The critique is here directed against reductive accounts of change which seem to attribute little or no causal role to moral ideals. Just to pick the aforementioned example: why is it that the Calvinist idea of sanctification of ordinary life took grasp of the collective imaginary of the people in early modern Europe? What is the ‘idées-force’ that this new vision of the good life contained? This interpretive question occupies a central place in a cultural approach to change. As Taylor rightly observes, “all historiography (and social science as well) relies on a (largely implicit) understanding of human motivation: how people respond, what they generally aspire to, the relative importance of given ends and the like. This is the truth behind Weber’s celebrated affirmation that any explanation in sociology has to be ‘adequate as to meaning’.” [9].

Now, when we try to explain the rise of social movements (or any phenomenon involving social change) this interpretive question alone does not suffice. In these cases, we also want to know which were the precipitating conditions for their coming into being. Without discarding available theories that provide an account of these movements in terms of structural conditions and opportunities, I propose to see their emergence as a result of a clash of socio-political self-understandings. Political opportunities and resources, the existence of grass-root networks (among other mobilizing structures), and the apparition of charismatic figures, all these factors do in fact help to bring these movements about, but they should be seen as *facilitating conditions* and not as their causes. From the cultural perspective, values and ideals, moral and political self-understandings play a crucial role in shaping the course of the events.<sup>3</sup>

It is not a simplistic idealist position, however. In order for a moral ideal to have inherent power in transforming reality, it must be an *imagined* ideal, not a mere theory. According to the ‘embodied’ conception of meaning that we subscribe to—in the tradition of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, and Michael Polanyi—there is an inextricable connection between ideas (theories) on the one hand, and practices and institutions on the other, where the former cannot be conceived without the latter. In a sense, ideas can be even seen as secondary to practices, in that they articulate or make explicit what was ‘always already’ present in the ways people act within society, in the existing practices. This dimension of implicit or inarticulate meaning is what we identified above as the ‘background understanding’ of a human community. The complex relation ideas/practices and its consequences for the study of social change in general and political change in particular has been aptly summarized by Taylor with his distinction of two different (ideal typical) paths in which this can occur:

“On the one hand, a theory may inspire a new kind of activity with new practices, and in this way form the imaginary of whatever groups adopt these practices. The first Puritan churches formed around the idea of a covenant provide examples of this. A new ecclesial structure flowed from a theological innovation; this becomes part of the story of political change, because the civil structures themselves were influenced in certain American colonies by the ways churches were governed, as with Connecticut Congregationalism, where only the converted enjoyed full citizenship.

<sup>3</sup> Within social psychology, there are approaches to social movements, such as the one by David Snow and various of his colleagues, which do take into account the crucial role played by ideas and sentiments for explaining collective action, but these focus rather narrowly on conscious strategic efforts to shape common self-understandings. There are two very important issue that unfortunately I cannot elaborate further here, but that at least deserved being named: a) these cognitivist approaches do not concede enough importance to the background understandings that people have, the richer dimension of implicit meaning central to our cultural theory, and b) they remain committed to a impoverished behavioral ontology that cannot capture the dialogical conception of the self we adhere here. This social psychological line of thought can be traced back to G. H. Mead. (For a detailed discussion on this last point, see: Ch. Taylor, *The Dialogical Self*, in: *The Interpretive Turn – Philosophy, Science, Culture*, Eds. D. R. Hiley et al., Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991)

Or else the change in the social imaginary comes with a reinterpretation of a practice that already existed in the old dispensation. Older forms of legitimacy are colonized, as it were, with a new understanding of order, and then transformed, in certain cases, without a clear break.” [5].

As we see, in both cases change happens through a transformation of the social imaginary of the people involved. And here lays the difference with vulgar idealistic positions. For all that has been said, the concept of self-interpretation we are using throughout here should be understood in a broader and deeper sense: not as mere ‘ideas’ but as ‘modes of social relation’ among agents.

Let us examine briefly an example to get a taste of how moral ideals and values can mobilize people and modify social and political conditions. In the 1960s a large cultural change started taking place in our Western civilization, particularly in Central Europe and North America. What was involved in this mutation, whose locus was the young, was that “certain of the fundamental reference points for the formation of identity in our civilization [began] being challenged” [15]; in particular, 1) the model of maturity, where the adult man determines out of himself his values and life goals, as opposed to an external source of authority. This ideal of a self-defining subject based on individual freedom played then a central role in American culture, as it still does today. 2) From the point of view of the self-defining individual, the surrounding world is consequently seen as a set of raw materials for his own (productive) purposes, rather than as a source for forming his own identity; which is in turn connected with 3) a certain orientation to the future: the past as that to be constantly surpassed. This is a paradigmatic example of collective identity crisis, as a crisis in allegiance to this model among young people, especially among students, which was followed by a complex and interrelated host of social movements.

How to account for this identity crisis and the emergence of the new social movements and their characteristic agenda for the advocacy of ‘identity’ politics? At that time, the rising generations were already in a position to experience some of the chaotic ecological and social consequences stemming from the aforementioned model, which gave them a reason to challenge it. But one could argue as well that the new generation brought with them a longing for community and a new sense for creativity and human feeling, against which the dominant model of maturity appears to certain extent as inhuman and unsocial; it cut us off from old sources of identity [15]. Pressing social and ecological problems (associated to the prevailing social model) as well as a feeling of dissatisfaction with the dominant culture are just two reasons among others that help explain an increasing divergence between the official institutional order and the new sensibility of the young generations, which pressed for a variety of changes, in legislation, in the formation of new political parties, new social networks and communities, among others.

#### VIII. CULTURAL PLURALISM AND CULTURAL CHANGE

I would like to make explicit one final implication of the cultural approach presented here. It was noted that the notion

of ‘self-interpretation’ conveys the idea of a first-person description; that the task of the researcher is to understand social life from the perspective of the social agents themselves. It was further argued that these self-interpretations are never the possession of atomistic individuals but they exist in the form of socially shared common understandings, which can only be properly addressed and studied as such with the help of a holistic approach. Now, behind this ideal of social inquiry there is a particular conception of culture, one that is closely associated with the meaning this word has in anthropology. In the context of the discussion of atomism, culture was generally identified as a ‘historically and geographically bounded set of inter-subjective meanings within which particular actions acquire a value that otherwise would not have’. More specifically, culture can be viewed as a particular language and a set of practices, including visions of the good life, society, person, among other defining aspects of any human community. In this anthropological sense, cultures can be seen as original and unique world-views or broad value horizons, which are mutually incommensurable. And it is precisely this ‘cultural pluralism’, the irreducibility of cultures, what our cultural approach sets itself to capture. This culturalist stance has huge consequences for the analysis of modern societies and their inherent conflicts and transformations.

In the culturalist viewpoint, the difference between pre-modern (Christian) Europe and modern western secularized societies is as big as the difference we find among cultures around the globe, say, between India and the USA. The pluralist stance is opposed to what Taylor calls ‘acultural’ theories of modernity, a dominant line during the last two hundred years, which see the growth of science, instrumental rationality, negative freedom, democratic self-rule as universal and neutral changes that any society could (and inevitably will) undergo, and not as distinctive features of a particular culture originating in Europe [16]. But this distorts. The acultural take on modernity as a universal phenomenon justifies the imposition of the modern ‘package’ of values, institutions and practices on other cultures, unfitting us to understand the contemporary phenomenon of multiple modernities. In Taylor’s view, an acultural theory “locks us into an ethnocentric prison, condemned to project our own forms onto everyone else and blissfully unaware of what we are doing” [16].

Contrary to this, an appropriate understanding of the cultural specificity of North-Atlantic societies permits in turn the clear recognition of the specificity of *other* cultures and of the particular trajectories they have followed in modernizing, for instance, the modernization process that has taken place among Latin American countries. Here as well social movements have marked an important part of the course of the twentieth century, following the pattern we have tried to show (discrepant self-understandings leading to legitimation crises from which these movements arise) that is at the basis of this kind of phenomenon. However, the only way of arriving at an *explanation* of the political struggles in Latin American countries is by engaging in a concrete investigation of the political history of this continent, with its characteristic mixture of Pre-Columbian, Colonial, and

European enlightenment values.

## IX. CONCLUSION

I have been discussing some distinctive elements of a cultural theory of change. It is *holistic* in that it treats culture as an indecomposable unit of meaning, as the common property of all of its (relevant) members. Within these communities of meaning people can of course disagree, a diversity of views can arise, but their disagreement is only possible to the extent that they share in the first place a basic set of common norms and understandings of what society is, what are the defining features and attributions of a citizens, etc. Our cultural approach conceives (intrinsic) change as endogenously driven by a *conflict of self-interpretations* within a particular culture, the analysis of which presupposes an *historical* or genealogical investigation for the clarification of the concrete conditions of the conflict in question. In this sense, it attaches great importance to moral and political ideals in their capacity to determine the modification of socio-political conditions. This recognition of the *inherent power of values* must not be confused, as it was noticed, with a unilateral idealist understanding of history. In this connection, we maintained that human and social change is always mediated by a hermeneutical process taking place in the minds of the people, in that it presupposes a *transformation of the social imaginary* of a given population at a given time. Finally, change must always be studied as a particular phenomenon in connection with a particular culture, and never as value-free operations (instrumental rationalization processes, the move towards 'organic' forms of cohesion, etc.) as we find them in classical theories of modernity; this was called the *cultural pluralist* stance. Taken together, these features make up a unique perspective on social change among existing theories in the field, one that I see especially suited for the study of social movements and their emergence, a phenomenon we see today

occurring with increasing force everywhere in the world. Far from intending to provide a detailed theory, the previous reflections were limited to indicate the *direction* towards a more satisfactory investigation of social change in general and social movements in particular.

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