



The Sociological Contexts of Thich Nhat Hanh's Teachings

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Abstract: Placing sociology into dialogue with the theories of Thich Nhat Hanh can prove a fruitful endeavor, especially as another example of the growing conversation between science and spirituality. Engaging in a dialogue with Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings, however, requires that we understand these teachings both (1) within their context as an example of a family of engaged spiritualities that arose in the 20th century to address the dreams and dilemmas of modernity, and (2) within their context as a contemporary adaptation of traditional Buddhist philosophy. This essay discusses both of these contexts, while also suggesting possible ways that academic sociological theories might relate to or parallel with the Engaged Buddhist theory of Thich Nhat Hanh.

INTRODUCTION

For sociology to enter into dialogue with Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings requires that sociologists understand these teachings both as one example of a family of engaged spiritualities which arose in the 20th century in response to the dreams and dilemmas of modernity, as well as an adaptation of ancient Buddhist teachings. Thich Nhat Hanh's life and message resonate so strongly across regional and religious divides throughout the world today precisely because they are able to bridge modern concerns with ancient wisdom. In this short essay, I situate Thich Nhat Hanh's message within these modern and ancient contexts,

while also highlighting parallels between areas of sociological theory and the Buddhist philosophy underpinning Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings.

Though religions have always had, to varying degrees, social dimensions and teachings promoting universal or "brotherly" love, in the 20th century a number of engaged spiritualities emerged throughout the globe which have placed greater importance than ever before on the social dimensions of spirituality. These engaged spiritualities represent perhaps the most intense examples of what Casanova (1994) theorizes as the potential of religion to assist modernity in fulfilling the promise of the enlightenment by strongly advocating uni-

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versal values within the public sphere. To name only a few, these engaged spiritualities have included: the Catholic Liberation Theology teachings of Bishops Romero and Ruiz, the engaged Hinduism of Mohandas Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, the renewal Judaism of Michael Lerner, and the engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa (Aurobindo 1973; Gandhi 1960; Gandhi 1983; Hanh 1987; Hanh 1998; Lerner 1995; Rothberg 1993; Sivaraksa 1992; Smith 1996).

On the one hand, these engaged spiritualities emerged through the adaptation by religious leaders of modern ideologies of progress, of democratic ideals, and of the utopic dreams of socialist revolutionaries. On the other hand, these engaged spiritualities emerged as an explanation of the many failures of modern political and scientific efforts to achieve the progressive, democratic goals of the enlightenment. Proponents of these engaged spiritualities claim that the lack of human spiritual maturity and cultivation is at the core of modernity's failures; and therefore, that spiritual cultivation is crucial to true modern progress.

THE CONTEXT OF MODERNITY

Underlying the modern dream of historical progress is the belief that greater and greater human well-being will come from the ever expanding power of science to manipulate nature, the economy to produce increasingly differentiating consumables, democracy to liberate all oppression, and rational education based in an achievement oriented ethic to increase productivity and civility (Agrawal 1996; Escobar 1995; Lipset 1967; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Rostow 1960; Sachs 1992). Corresponding with this dream of modern progress is a faith in the emancipatory potential of reason, in the doctrine of the rights and equality of the individual, and in science. By the end of the

20th century, however, it had become clear to many observers that the modern project of Enlightenment reason, science, individual rights, nationhood, and industrial economic expansion failed to meet many of its promises (Agrawal 1996; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Sachs 1992).

Violence, poverty, inequality, and oppression remain in our modern world despite—and often because of—increased productive and technological capacities. Humans are not necessarily happier or more fulfilled by life in the modern world. Moreover, even as the unfolding of modernity and modern social struggles has leveled many hierarchies and made tremendous progress in areas such as increased empowerment and equality of women, there also have been many new hierarchies and divisions that have formed. And many new problems have been created by modern technologies—not the least of which is devastating ecological imbalance and toxicification of our environment (Inglehart and Norris 2005; Sachs 1992).

The socially engaged spiritualities of the 20th century, including Thich Nhat Hanh's, seek to address these problems of modernity by combining the enlightenment dream of social progress and human rights with religious teachings of the mystical realities of the universe, and spiritual practices of inner transformation. However, these engaged spiritual teachings have been largely ignored by liberatory and radical theorization within the social sciences. The reigning ideology of the modern social sciences sees religion as, at best, an important institution for fostering community belonging and individual ethical socialization. Religion in such an ideology is to be applauded only as long as it remains confined within the private sphere, and does not publicly contradict modern relativism and pluralism (Berger 1969). In a more critical vein, however, other strands of modernist social scientific thinking de-

pict religion as the seat of human superstition, irrationality, and bigotry; and as blocking progress, generating wars, and justifying inequality and savagery (Asad 1993; Barber 1996; Huntington 1996; Marty and Appleby 1991; Marx 1978a; Marx 1978b; Pope 1965).

However, more than ever before, there is in the current day an opportunity for integration of the collected wisdom of spiritual traditions with the modern scientific enterprise. Dialogue between scientists and spiritual leaders is already underway in the physical and biological sciences. Empirical, experimental methodologies have brought sciences as diverse as physics and neuroscience into convergence with many of the principles held by diverse religious traditions (Bohm 2002; Capra 1984; Lama 2005; Radin 2006). In physics, in particular, the vision of the stable, atomistic Newtonian cosmos has been abandoned by many scientists in favor of a mysterious quantum reality, and much space has opened up in the new scientific worldview for the enchanted (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003).

THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

Undertaking a sociological dialogue with the engaged spiritual theories of Thich Nhat Hanh could provide an important step in the continuing dialogue of modern science with ancient wisdom. However, it is crucial that social scientists understand that Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy is itself already an expression of Buddhism in dialogue with modernity and seeking to address modern social goals. An important first step of any sociological dialogue with Thich Nhat Hanh, therefore, must involve tracing his ideas to their pre-modern origin, to their original Buddhist roots.

For the last 2500 years, Buddhism, as a philosophical tradition, has employed experiential techniques for discovering the

way that thoughts, categories, and ideas are conditioned in the mind, and how this leads to suffering. At the core of Buddhist teaching is the twelve-steps of dependent origination (Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995; Payutto 1994). It was the experiential realization of dependent origination that led the Buddha to enlightenment, and it is fundamentally from the teaching of dependent origination that Thich Nhat Hanh draws his theory of interbeing (Hanh 1998). Interbeing is an attempt by Thich Nhat Hanh to label what existence is, given the reality of dependent origination.

The teaching of dependent origination shows how consciousness and life arise in the world (again and again in a cyclical existence) and why suffering occurs in the world. For Western sociologists it is perhaps easiest to understand dependent origination by focusing on the traditional Buddhist idea of "kammic formations" (Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995). These formations, much like Bourdieu's habitus, are tendencies of thought, perception, and bodily disposition which are stored as a type of memory in the mind-body complex, and which orient action (Bourdieu 1977). They function much like Bourdieu describes the habitus as functioning, as the "generative principle of regulated improvisations," and as "dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems, and thanks to the unceasing corrections of the results obtained" (Bourdieu 1977: 78, 83).

In traditional Buddhist philosophy, the individual comes to perceive their situation through their kammic formations and feels impulse towards actions conditioned by their kammic formations, much the same way Bourdieu posits that individuals experience and act through habitus. However, the Buddhist idea of kammic formations

differs from Bourdieu's idea of habitus in significant ways. Kammic formations are not merely inscribed onto the individual by social location, as the habitus is; rather, they are created by the intentional action of the individual across multiple lifetimes. When the individual acts according to the impulses of their kammic formations, he/she strengthens and reinforces that particular kammic formation. Alternatively, however, if the individual develops a sufficient enough awareness of their mind, of the present moment, and of the fact that all experiences, including existence, are impermanently passing phenomenon, he/she can learn to choose not to obey particular kammic impulses. Eventually, the impulse wears thin, and that particular kammic formation dissipates.

In the Buddhist view, the sense of self and the identification with mental and physical experience arise because kammic formations condition the individual to move towards pleasure (greed) and to push away from discomfort (aversion); and because the individual lacks a clear view of the ultimate impermanence of their current existence (ignorance). Following impulses of greed and aversion, reinforces and reproduces these impulses as new and more deeply entrenched kammic formations, which in turn reinforces the individual's sense of a separate, permanent self. This sense of a permanent, separate self continually needs to acquire more—be it pleasure, prestige, power, status, acceptance, etc.—and is continually attempting to defend itself from the inevitable frailties of human life, including sickness and death. It is this sense of a separate, permanent self which causes humans to suffer and to cause suffering to others.

In daily life, Buddhist tradition teaches that the human expresses this specific sense of self through four types of attachments—attachment to self, to ideas, to pleasure, and to rites (Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995). These four types of attachments parallel Weber's

four orientations of social action—instrumental-rationality (attachment to self), value-rational (attachment to ideas), affectual (attachment to pleasure), and traditional (attachment to rites) (Weber 1968). However, unlike Weber, Buddhist thought, through the theory of kammic formations, provides a psychological, experiential underpinning for explaining why the individual craves to act according to these orientations.

In Buddhist thought, individual liberation from suffering comes from experiencing the impermanence and empty nature of reality; and in doing so, purifying the heart of kammic formations based in greed and aversion. Mindfulness, meditation, compassion, generosity, tranquility, patience, joy, equanimity, and strong determination are all tools that help the individual to do this. In cultivating these tools and in releasing greed and aversion, the individual naturally and inherently begins to extend positive energy and qualities to the surrounding society. And through this act of extension, liberating social change is generated.

It is through the extension of positive qualities and energies into the world that Thich Nhat Hanh teaches we might address the social ills of the modern world, such as war, violence, or environmental destruction. It is through the mindful recognition of the interconnectedness, impermanence, and selflessness of our beings—which Thich Nhat Hanh points to with his term “interbeing”—that we might purify our hearts and generate positive qualities and energy to extend out to the world. The great leap for modern social scientists interested in how Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings might add to their understanding of social liberation is seeing how these internal processes might come to effect external and social realities.

Sociologically measuring the silent extension of energy and the impact of personal spiritual transformation on social in-

dicators or processes is a nearly impossible task. However, social scientific theories examining the production of subjectivity, especially those stemming from Foucault, might provide avenues by which to imagine how internal transformation might lead to social transformation (Foucault 1984). Foucault describes the shift in modernity as a move away from sovereign power and towards disciplinary power and biopower. Disciplinary power is exercised over individuals via the generation of self-monitoring subjectivities and psychological sciences; and biopower is exercised over populations via the use of statistics and social sciences. This new modern power comes together in the production of governmentality. Governmentality involves the creation of self-administering subjects who possess a particular form of knowledge that regulates these individuals from within. Governmentality fits the internal subjectivity of the individual with the administrative structures of the state. It is mediated via institutional apparatus and professional knowledge, and includes social regulation of even the very personal aspects of individual life.

Mahmood builds upon Foucault to show that the process of forming subjectivities, even when disconnected from the formal state apparatus, is political and has effects upon the formal state apparatus (Foucault 1984; Mahmood 2005). Gorski also points to this fact from a different angle in his claim that particular types of religious disciplinary methods adopted from Calvinism formed the template for social processes that gave rise to the modern state (Gorski 2003). Using Foucault's language, then, we might think of the relationship which Thich Nhat Hanh theorizes between the internal cultivation of positive qualities via mindfulness and liberatory social outcomes as a form of "reverse governmentality." Subjective recognition of interbeing and spiritual practices of mindfulness may generate the inner energy that allows us to

shape the world around us positively. These inner processes may then scale up to reformulate power structures, in a process of reverse governmentality which works in the opposite direction of the way Foucault theorizes power structures shape our subjectivities.

Thich Nhat Hanh expresses throughout his teachings the idea of changing social and political structures via transformation of our subjectivity. This idea is perhaps nowhere more plainly stated, however, than in the title of his classic text *Being Peace* (Hanh 1987). Drawing together the inner subjective with the political, he writes in *Being Peace*, "Can the peace movement talk in loving speech, showing the way for peace? I think that will depend on whether the people in the peace movement can be peace. Because without being peace, we cannot do anything for peace. If we cannot smile, we cannot help other people to smile. If we are not peaceful, then we cannot contribute to the peace movement" (Hanh 1987: 79).

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