

Societies learn and yet the world is hard to change

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Summary

Evolution and learning are two analytically distinct concepts. People learn yet evolution (“change”) does not necessarily take place. To clarify this problem the concept of learning is explicated. A first problem addressed is the question of who is learning. Here a shift from the single actor perspective to an interaction perspective is proposed (using Habermas and Luhmann as theoretical arguments for such a shift). Both however idealize the preconditions that interactants share while learning collectively. Against rationalist assumptions it is argued that in order to learn people need a narratively based shared world. What do they learn? They acquire knowledge and they learn how to learn. This still does not solve the problem why they learn. Going beyond the idea of self-propelling learning processes situations of uncertainty are identified as the mechanism of learning, naming situations of breakdown of narrative orders the deepest uncertainty to foster learning. Learning, this is the conclusion, does not guarantee evolution. It however provides the mutations for evolutionary processes to take place.

1. The theoretical problem

Societies certainly evolve. This evolution is based – in contrast with natural evolution based on genetic evolution – on “epigenetic” processes which we call cultural evolution. Epigenesis is a concept that refers to learning as a mechanism secondary to natural evolution.¹ This does not mean to say that animals do not learn. They do. But their learning is not constitutive for the evolution of their species. To link the mechanics and logics of social evolution to cultural evolution means that the learning of societies is constitutive for

1. For such arguments see especially Boyd/Richerson (1985). They analyze the specific differences between cultural transmission and genetic transmission and the function that errors, nonrandom variation and random environmental effects have on the mechanism of cultural transmission. For an early version of such an argument see Pringle (1951).

social evolution. Cultural evolution is a theory of the way in which learning proceeds.² Therefore I stress at the outset that societies do learn and that learning is even constitutive of social evolution.

That societies learn was not thematized until the beginning of modern societies. Whether we regard it as a Western ideology or not, cultural evolution has become a topic a reflection as such, leading to a specific idea of the learning that has taken place in human history. Contrasting it with the way in which traditional societies have handled this problem, might give us a first idea of the nature of this specifically modern notion of learning.

Traditional societies also had theories about the course of history which then became effective in shaping the course of history. Their idea was to posit a future state toward which human existence in society is moving. In Western religion the idea is clear: it is a process leading to a better world under the guidance of God. Thus we have an explicit “learning theory” built into this way of looking at the social world: God as the educator of the social world which tries to learn the best way it can. Concerning Eastern religions the ideas of perfection (like in Indian religions) or ideas of becoming ultimately identical with the cosmos imply ideas of stages of perfection which is another concept of a learning process. Specialists, religious “virtuosi” (from Buddhist monks to Vedic priests) helped along the process of arriving at these stages. This idea of a learning process did not refer simply to the individual. Since these ideas in Eastern types of religion foresaw that no individual could reach the stage of perfection in his or her life, the idea of a series of lives was developed which guaranteed that learning would go on even beyond the mere life of one individual. Thus the learning unit has been the collectivity for which the individual life was the medium toward a perfection of human beings as such.³

This short excursion into cultural and religious history (and there would be much to add concerning other religious traditions) was meant as a contrast to what happened in modern societies. To put it briefly: Modern society replaced God as the educator of man. It replaced God with intellectuals, i.e. with Society. Thus the ground of learning was no longer situated outside society, but inside society.

We have two main examples of this new kind of self-consciousness of society’s capacity to learn. The first is Marx and his idea of the development of the forces of production which is a theory of a technical or cognitive learning process allowing humans to control their environment and use it for their own purposes. This idea was not peculiar to Marx. He simply gave an expression to a widespread feeling of modern society learning at an incredible speed – in science, in technology, in the amount of practical knowledge necessary to trans-

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2. Whether the use of the term “evolution” in the concept of cultural evolution is a good choice can be questioned since social evolution and cultural evolution are completely different processes. Natural evolution is based on genetic mechanisms (and sometimes we talk in a loose way of genetic evolution). In the same loose way we talk of social evolution as based on learning mechanisms (and then we often talk of cultural evolution as learning processes). But these are terminological problems. See for this problem also Boyd/Richerson (1985).

3. The mode of “revelation” is a good indicator of the differences between these religions.

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form nature into an economic good. The second example is Herder's idea of an "Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts", of an education of the human race toward moral perfection, the educators being the enlightened moralists of their time, and its apotheosis in the Hegelian philosophy of history. Both ideas end in the notion that learning is a self-organizing process going on within society and moving society through progressive stages either toward moral universalism (this has been the one ethical tradition) or toward technological mastery of nature (this has been the cognitive/scientific tradition).

Sociology has broken with this naive way of looking at society. The sociology of knowledge has shown that this idea of society as a learning entity is itself a social construction that is constitutive of the culture of modern society. Society learned that it learned. And this increased tremendously the speed of cultural evolution, or the speed of societal learning.⁴ Modern societies thus created a new type of reflexive knowledge about the way they look at themselves. This is the reflexivity of modern societies. Modern society is a learning society. All this has become common knowledge. And yet, we still have no explanation why all this reflexivity has not helped to create the society we want. Thus the idea of a theory of societal learning generates a paradox: Why despite all kinds of learning it is so hard to change the world?⁵ This paradox will be addressed later and eventually be resolved by a theory of societal learning.

To do so I have to understand and clarify how societies learn, what they learn and why they learn. This latter question is important to explain why modern societies sometimes do not make use of what they have learned, and to explain why they at times block learning processes. The theoretical notion of learning that we have seems to be insufficient to answer such questions. So I have to reconstruct first what has been said about learning processes, see where wrong directions have been taken and check alternative routes for constructing theoretical models of social learning before starting the discussion why learning sometimes takes place and at other times not.

5. This question forms part of the title of an interesting article by Peters (1994).

4. This is what the contemporaries of the Enlightenment age noticed when looking at their own societies: they were irritated about all the new things coming up, having the sense that too much disorder is created through too much learning. See Eder (1985).

2. How do societies learn?

2.1 Learning actors

The first option that has directed the modelling and theorizing of social learning processes has to do with the assumption that in order to understand how society learns we have to understand how

individuals learn.⁶ This is the famous problem of the microfoundations of macro-developments, the problem that history is the result of myriads of individual actions.⁷ This way of framing the problem, I would like to argue, implies an inadequately reasoned assumption which can be identified by looking at individualistic modes of thinking a social order.

The theoretical discussion in sociology offers us a sophisticated model for understanding the micro-level basis of macro-learning. This is the model of socialization, the idea that a society socializes its members by inculcating norms and values. This model of socialization has been prominent for a long period, let us say from Parsons to Habermas.⁸ The specific character of these theories is that they relate a systemic perspective and an individualist actor perspective. Parsons sees action as governed by four pattern variables which are part of a system of action. Important for our purposes here is only that learning takes place on the system level in terms of increasing inclusion (universalism), value generalization and goal specification, but is explained in terms of properties of individual action. Habermas takes over this model, adding a cognitivist perspective to the theory of action, emphasizing the constructive character of the individual in the process of socialization (and this constructivism is based on ideas taken from generative grammatical theory and from Piagetian cognitivism and transformed into a communicative competence theory – the famous theory of communicative action which remains basically an individualist action theory). Here again the idea is that the evolution of social systems can be explained by an “action theory”, which means by reference to the action orientations of individual actors.

In Habermas this ultimately results in the attempt to parallelize individual and evolutionary learning in a double way (HABERMAS, 1979). The first is that knowledge about human development will reveal the possibly universal capacity of humans to develop their potentialities given by language; such a potential could be identified by reinterpreting Piagetian psychological theories of cognitive development as theories of individual learning with an in-built telos, namely cognitive reflexivity and universalistic moral argumentation. Having thus a model of potential human individual development, macro-developments could be understood as evolutionary learning processes by postulating an interaction between individual learning and sociocultural developments. Cultural evolution – it is concluded – is dependent upon individual learning capacities, and cultural evolution taking place guarantees the reproduction of such capacities which in turn raise the level of

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6. This is a classic topic in evolutionary theory. See Fishbein (1976) or Plotkin (1982). In social theory social psychologists have argued for such a perspective. See as a classic Bandura (1977) or more recently Holland et al. (1986).

7. This discussion has developed in a very differentiated way. See as a good overview Alexander et al. (1987).

8. This discussion is itself summarized in Habermas (1987).

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possible individual learning processes. Thus an interactive theory of individual and system level developments is the basis for the theory of evolutionary processes.

This theory still owes much to the early enlightenment which was unclear about its own function in the emerging modern world. Parsons and Habermas appear as new Herderians who still think in terms of individuals who have to be educated, adding the idea of a constructive reaction on the part of the educated, and therefore arguing for any symbolic act that could help people learn something. The best example of this practical implication is the proposal of Habermas that in order to learn a new step toward a democratic culture, the Germans should engage in a constitutional discussion, this discussion being seen as a medium for learning. Here the model of the intellectual launching a discussion with the intention of making people learn is obvious. This proposition has some resemblance to what the Germans call “Oberlehrerverhalten” (to behave like a high school teacher). This Habermasian proposition has not been taken up (itself a sociologically interesting event). I assume that this is the case not because the Germans are bad democrats who did not get enough lessons in democracy, but simply because of the fact that the learning of societies does not take place in this way.⁹

The socialization model runs counter to the logic of learning in really modern societies. Modernity has excluded the educational model of learning because it is too close to a hierarchical model which contradicts the basic premises of modernity.¹⁰ Thus the theoretical option to understand evolutionary learning in terms of the educational model is not viable. What then does a viable model suited to real modern societies look like? And what are its implications with regard to the normative implications of the Habermasian approach which represents an important line of modern social thought on societal development and societal learning?

Thus the socialization-theory approach to evolutionary learning has to be corrected in two different respects. First, it first has to be corrected with regard to its individualistic assumptions which say that the aggregate of educated people will learn. Secondly, it has to be corrected regarding the implicit relational model which is still indebted to the hierarchical tradition characteristic for early modern and non-modern universalistic cultures. A sociology of intellectuals is no longer the key to social learning.¹¹

The alternative is to give up the idea of learning individuals and to generalize the idea of some teaching others what to learn.¹²

9. This also explains the centrality of the sociology of intellectuals for explaining cultural evolution in modern societies (and even pre-modern societies with universalistic religions). See among many others Eisenstadt's discussion of the role of intellectuals in history (EISENSTADT, 1981, 1982).

10. You can educate the young, but no longer the adult.

11. Neither does the sociology of everyday knowledge tell us something about learning. However, symbolic interactionism, especially the work of Goffman, helps us to correct for a relational perspective to which we have to add the issue of how order, frames etc. are changed in the course of social change or social evolution.

12. See as a sensitive critique of Habermas and its potential Strydom (1992, 1993).

The micro-sociological basis of evolutionary learning processes has to be conceptualized not in terms of a theory of social action, but in terms of a theory of social interaction, not in terms of competent subjects, but in terms of evolving forms of intersubjectivity, not in terms of intentions, but in terms of relations. What this exactly means will now be clarified.

2.2 An alternative theoretical option: interactionism

The theoretical traditions starting with the individual¹³ remain stuck in their individualist assumptions, and they are only consequential when they finally declare that their research program is basically individualistic, either because of assumptions about human cognitive capacities, or because of assumptions about their rational motivations. A non-psychological (and non-individualist) theory of action is based on the idea that the basis of social learning are not individuals but social relationships. Thus it is not important what people have in mind but what they share.¹⁴ Even the classical educational model implies a social relationship: an hierarchical relationship that allows one to go from the top to the bottom, from the educator to the learning individual. Thus hierarchical relationships can be explained as a special form of social relations, e.g. as a power-based relationship. A relational theory at the same time no longer uses the individual as the basic unity of analysis, but relations between them. For a learning theory this offers the possibility of seeing the educational model in relational terms and conceptualize learning theories along the continuum of hierarchical and egalitarian modes of learning.¹⁵

Such a shift is not the result of an immanent logic of thinking about learning (if there is at all such a thing like paradigmatic logics), but has to do with real changes in the way social learning has been observed by those involved in collective learning processes. The central point is that modern culture is perceived by its participants as the outcome of a collective enterprise, as the outcome of collective discussion, of collective argumentation in groups, organizations, institutions.¹⁶ The production of modern culture is perceived by the actors involved as a collective learning process (mostly of a class, namely the 'Bildungsbürgertum'). Thus the understanding of modern society itself forces us to take the step from an individualist to a relational theory of social action.

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13. This holds not only for the above-mentioned Parsons/Habermas tradition, but also for rational-choice theories which are equally based on individualist assumptions. The latter differ simply by assuming a simpler model of individual learning and behaviour. See for a discussion of this Eder/Schmidtke (1998).

14. Whether what they have in mind is more or less than what they share is an important point for further discussion of social learning processes.

15. The arguments for a relational approach have been recently summarized by Emirbayer (1997).

16. This has been emphasized by Habermas in his book on the idea of the public space ("Öffentlichkeit"). See also the extensive treatment of the historical forms through which this idea of equal and discursive interaction situations has evolved in Eder (1985).

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This point has been made clear – with new costs regarding the understanding of evolutionary learning processes – by Luhmann.¹⁷ His emphasis on a relational perspective on society and his reconstruction of the self-organizing processes and the self-organizing capacities of social systems signals the necessary change in perspective. Learning is something that takes place in the process of interaction, and its representation in an individual mind is simply one (and often the least important) factor to account for change or evolutionary learning processes.¹⁸ What is lost with Luhmann's theorizing is the idea of a microsocial mechanism of learning. Although taking an adequate perspective, it strips social reality of any assumption about what is going on in the micro-foundations of macro-processes. The non-individualist theory is like the naked diva (or king) who has to get new clothes.

2.3 Two models of interactionism

There are two ways to give to the diva (or king) new clothes. One option is to fill the interactionist theory with rationalistic assumptions about the relational character of social reality. The other is to fill it again with assumptions that are contained in the Habermasian individualist theory of action. I will give only two indications of what this refilling of the theory might look like. Concerning the rationalistic redefinition of the relational model, evolutionary learning can be conceived in various ways. The most simple would be to formulate a theory of the change of preference structures as the result of a series of rational choice situations. Axelrod's model of iterated games provides a rather limited model of such a learning process: it is an explanation of just one possible learning process within the model (AXELROD, 1984, 1986). Another way would be to conceive learning as the effect of rational cooperation, as collective agreements on rules of the game in order to coordinate beforehand individual action, motivated by the avoidance of possible irrational results (ELSTER, 1989). A still more radical solution to learning within this paradigm would be to argue that rationally motivated action forces us to create normative agreements in order to avoid irrational results. This argument is based on the observation that to be rational does not exclude that it is rational to be irrational. This being the case, norms have to be defined and agreed upon in order to generate a minimum of social rationality to be able to continue to exist within the social relations from which action started. The interesting implication of this is that rationality

17. For a general introduction into the theory of society as a self-organizing system see Luhmann (1995).

18. The theory of charisma is a case in point.

is no longer located in the individual, but in the social context to which(s) he is bound.

The learning of societies, then, is a phenomenon that cannot be explained by individual learning, since it is an effect of the social coordination of learning processes of individuals. Social coordination, however, follows a logic different from the logic of individual learning. This theory can inform a theory of societal learning insofar as such learning processes can be explained as attempts of hindering irrational action.¹⁹ The mechanism described is a basic mechanism of social learning, from interpersonal group learning up to evolutionary learning. Examples could be given with regard to the emergence of the state, of dietary norms and of contractual norms, to the emergence of contractual norms in bargaining etc.²⁰

The alternative way to fill in the relational model is to return to some of the substantive assumptions of the Habermasian theory, namely that individuals base their capacity to act rationally upon specific cognitive and moral competences (“not-being-able-not-to learn” – see Habermas, 1979, p. 147 – was the initial way of justifying this type of argument!).²¹ The argument of such a communication theory approach would run like this: In order to develop such competences, certain microsocial situations are necessary. This would give us a key to distinguish between situations that contribute to the learning of individuals and those that do not.

A good example is the model of collective learning processes that Miller (1986) proposes. He defines “ideal” collective learning processes as attempts to solve cognitive inconsistencies through rational argumentation which requires that the principles of generalization, of objectivity and of truth are followed in such argumentative situations. This ideal situation then serves the identification of situations in which learning is either prevented, interrupted or systematically restricted, which leads to a typology of blocked learning processes he calls authoritarian, ideological and regressive learning. That learning is prevented is not due to the fact that individuals do not learn, but to the fact that they are involved in collective learning processes in which the relations between individuals “neutralize” requirements for rational argumentation.

A first type of blocking collective learning processes is given in situations where the body of knowledge is accepted by its mere authority. The principle that any statement should be subject to a test of its generalizability is no longer applied. This is authoritarian learning.²² Ideological learning is more subtle. It mainly says that in certain areas, such as moral and normative questions, we already know what the right answers are. It implies that the principle of

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19. This can become, if not handled with enough care, a rather reactionary theory, not very different from Gehlen's idea of institutions which serve as bulwarks of rationality against the potential irrationality of individual action.

20. Regarding this argument there is a vast literature. On the emergence of the state see works such as Claessen/Skalnik (1978), Harris (1977, 1978). Regarding dietary regimes the debate between Harris and Sahlins is informative (Harris 1979; Sahlins 1976). For the problem of contractual norms see Elster (1991).

21. See as an application to the problem of the emergence of the state Eder (1976).

22. Adorno's analysis of authoritarian thinking (ADORNO et al., 1969 [1950]) finds here a systematic explication.

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23. There is a similar movement within the rational choice tradition. The differences between a rational-choice approach and a communication-theoretical (or cognitivist) approach, however, should not be minimized. They are two fundamentally opposed notions of rationality. The first has to do with a rationality that coordinates social action through some form of market mechanism.

In the second case we have a notion of rationality that has much more to do with the tradition we live in, i.e. modernity.

Thus the differences have to do with a different relationship of the way we think and the world where we have learnt to think in such a way. I presume that a cognitivist approach does better than a rationalist approach – but this is a controversial matter to be pursued in another discussion. Modern reflexivity is a phenomenon that can be analyzed much more adequately by the latter theory – how can the discourse about normative necessity be analyzed other than by reference to rationality that is built into the same social situation, namely rational coordination of arguments?

objectivity can be suppressed, which entails that the arguments of the other (the enemy) are not seen as part of the definition of the situation among those taking part in an argumentative process, even when there are no arguments against this position. Arguments are systematically excluded from the argumentative process. Regressive learning is the most radical and clear-cut case of blocked learning processes because in these learning processes the idea of argumentative rationality, the principle of truth, is given up. This is the condition of collective irrationality. The condition of collective irrationality, where one's action with the actions of the others leads to anxiety, to retreatism from forms of rational argumentation. It is not hard to imagine such situations, from double bind situations (i. e. psychiatric cases) up to Stalinist discourse.

This communication-theoretical approach to learning where no longer individuals but relationships between them are the basic reference, leads us to the idea that the rationality of discourses is tied to the social organization of these discourses. Thus the idea of rationality switches from the individual as its base to the social situation in which it acts.²³ But there is a problem involved in such rationalist assumptions. It can be questioned whether there is something more fundamental to the relationally defined situation of interacting actors than rationality, something that goes beyond assumptions of rationally interacting actors. Does the rationality assumption still owe too much to the idea of rational action?

2.4 The narrative foundation of a social order

We still live too much in the shadow of Max Weber and his idea that in order to understand the social we have to understand the meaning actors attach to their action. The problem of how to get from subjective meaning to a social order has been solved by Weber – as we know – by constructing ideal types of action. It is the assumption that there is a certain rationality to each action which allows us to understand the social action of others simply by the fact that we share with them such standards of rationality. It is obvious that this already is an interpretation of Weber, but one which accounts for much of the subsequent theoretical debates from Parsons to Habermas and later.

This assumption has been put under severe critique in recent years. The criterion of rationality is too narrow to help us understand social action in terms of its role in producing and reproducing a social order. It especially does not help us to explain what is the

shared understanding of a situation in which actors learn and contribute to shared knowledge of the world. This is the critique of “intellectualism” in social theorizing (HEISKALA, 1997). A further critique is that such an idea does not allow us to understand why so much learning that would be possible does not take place. It seems that societies learn only under specific social conditions, namely when a basic uncertainty permeates society that destroys the basic ordering of experiences with the natural, the social and the psychic world. This is the critique of “idealism”.

How are we to conceive of a non-intellectualistic and a non-idealistic basis for constructing a sociological theory of learning? The classical answers are not sufficient: To go back to everyday knowledge is a strategy which is still intellectualistic because it replaces scientific knowledge with everyday knowledge without giving up the focus on knowledge.²⁴ To go back to realism is a strategy which is still idealistic because it only specifies material conditions under which ideas realize themselves without giving up the focus on the causal force of ideas or meanings.²⁵ A third option is to go beyond meaning, to go beyond the assumption of a substantive meaning of action and move toward the way in which action is made meaningful in the course of action and interaction. This “dramaturgical” turn from meaning to making something meaningful (WUTHNOW, 1987) forces us to look at the processes through which something meaningful is generated rather than at meaning as such.

Is there a pre-cognitive basis for understanding and explaining social processes of meaning construction? Recent theorizing about the basis of social order is oriented towards questions of reciprocal recognition of actors in social situations (HONNETH, 1992; TAYLOR, 1992). What links an action to another action is their recognition as meaningful action by all involved. What actors produce in such processes is not a rationally sustained consensus but rather a sense of a collective identity of those recognizing each other. Identity constructions involve signifying activities that do not claim any particular rationality; they are activities that produce a social order beyond or before a normatively justified order. For the sake of simplicity we may call such an order a narrative order. In narrative accounts actors recognize themselves and the others and thus are bound to a world of reciprocal recognition.

Such narrative orders may even include types of rational action and knowledge. Rational action (in Wein the narrative order of a social interaction. Rationality then is just a special case of a more encompassing logic of action. An instructive case is the new institutional theory. It

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24. The phenomenological tradition is as cognitivist as its Weberian counterpart. It differs only in its methodological premises regarding the relationship between everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge.

25. This realist tradition is especially pronounced in the recent work of John Searle (1995). A good discussion is Corsten (1997).

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argues that institutions are based on narrative orders, not on rationalities. This idea (POWELL; DIMAGGIO, 1991) provides another case for the reorientation of sociological thinking away from the illusions of rational action. What institutions do and think is to use rational models of action to rationalize what they are doing, to give a narrative account of their rationality.

The thesis that informs more recent theorizing is that actions are related to each other not by some implicit rationality standard but by some narrative order that makes one's action meaningful in relation to the actions of others. Thus we no longer have to struggle with the difference in quality of rationality. But we have to figure out what lies behind rationality. Wuthnow has called this strategy "dramaturgical theory" because it emphasizes the processes through which meanings (rational as well as irrational or a-rational meanings of action) are made meaningful.²⁶ The aim to go "beyond meaning" is bound to a transsubjective basis of social action and interaction. The claim is that the narrative organization of experience provides the structural features of social situations in which the participants in such situations either have chances to learn or are forced not to learn.²⁷

This discussion has so far given an answer to the question of how learning takes place. It takes place in situations in which interaction processes produce effects that modify the collectively shared knowledge. The most general answer to the "how"-question is that in social situations something "new" is generated. When such learning takes place it produces specific results: Learning changes a) basic normative frames and beliefs that guide social action or b) the empirical knowledge about the world used as a resource in social action.

So far the question of learning has been reformulated by opting for an interactionist approach. We are no longer concerned with learning children who are raised to their highest potential. Rather, we have interacting adults that learn in the course of their interaction, in situations in which some basic narratives provide the common ground for reciprocal understanding and communication. But what do they learn? This question leads us to a second problematic, another opting out of the classical model of social learning. This has to do with the question of what societies learn when they learn. The question is now what is learned in narratively ordered situations which provide structure to social relations. Thus the institutionalization of knowledge has to be looked at: i.e. the production of knowledge and of social forms that collect and retain such knowledge beyond the capacity of individual memory.

26. The founder of such a perspective is Goffman who showed especially in frame analysis how people stage through specific rules the meaning of any act or event, i.e. they make something meaningful through action. See also Swidler (1986).

27. The narrative structure of social orders describes an important recent trend in social theorizing. See, e.g., Somers (1994). The more sociologists deal with and discover forms of knowledge that are further away from cognitive knowledge modeled according to the standard of science they turn to narrative theories and methodologies.

3 What do societies learn?

3.1 Substantive knowledge and procedural rules

When societies learn they do not produce themselves but they produce culture. This might sound obvious. However, theoretical debate in recent years, especially in the wake of cultural studies, has blurred this central difference. Culture and society are two different things. Their conflation has venerable traditions, especially in social and cultural anthropology when ethnographers defined the society they studied as a culture.²⁸ They conflated what a society produced as a representation of itself with society. In order to clarify this point I will use the distinction between substantive learning and rule learning.

When societies learn, they produce a stock of common knowledge through which they construct a social reality. To do so, they create shared cognitive rules for classifying and interpreting information that is flowing around in a society. Learning processes that lead to the accumulation of knowledge will be defined as “substantive learning”. This leads to the idea of a culture of society which is made up of different types of knowledge, ranging from everyday to scientific knowledge. Instead of understanding social learning as a phase-like process of going from primitive everyday knowledge to rational scientific knowledge, I propose the idea of a multidimensional process of cumulative learning, taking place at all levels of knowledge simultaneously. Accumulated knowledge, however, is only meaningful when it can be used by social actors, when it is ordered in a way that allows the communication of knowledge in a society.

Societies also learn something else. They learn to create situations in which experience can be stored and passed over to the next generation. They learn to stabilize the information that has been generated or is being generated in a society. Societies learn how to learn. They learn procedures of how to generate new knowledge and how to assimilate new knowledge into the stock of existing knowledge. This learning is defined as social rule learning as opposed to substantive learning.²⁹

3.2 The production of knowledge

Substantive learning has been the main focus of theories of cultural evolution. We can reconstruct the accumulation of techno-

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28. The separation of society and culture as two distinct entities is a central argument in Archer (1988).

29. Accumulation is certainly also rule-based learning. So the difference between these two types of learning is less their rule character than the different types of rules involved: the first series of rules being rules of cognitive ordering, the second series of rules being procedural rules for organizing the social world.

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logical knowledge as well as the rationalization of moral order toward universalism (and their speciation into competing universalisms). Piaget's theory of cognitive development has been used to reconstruct parallel processes on the historical level (Piaget himself presented a huge three volume account on the evolution of cognitive knowledge in history). Habermas, continuing this line of thought and linking it to Weber's idea of rationalization as the main process in cultural evolution, has added the idea of a process of moral rationalization through history (HABERMAS 1987).

Since nobody in this world can cover the question of what has been learned in history, simplifications have been made which immediately provoked criticism from historians of science, technology, religion and all t, technology, religion and all tes such as Orientalists, Africanists etc. One way of simplifying this task has been to reconstruct the basic assumptions of this knowledge. One strand ended up in philosophies of history which revealed the ideal movement of ideas behind the real movement of ideas, a strategy that soon lost credibility. Another one has been to reconstruct paradigmatic structures and show their temporal structure (this is genetic structuralism in the Piagetian or Habermasian sense). The third alternative has been "critique", to criticize the cognitive arrangements through which cultures described each other, a cognitive game that can be either romantic (we do not understand the primitives) or colonialist (the primitives do not understand us) or deconstructivist (nobody can understand anybody else).³⁰

Learning in the sense of cumulative knowledge has certainly taken place in history. However, such a cumulative process is simply due to time. The more people undergo experiences, the more they accumulate (and forget) such experiences.³¹ It seems as if such a theoretical question is simply ill-posed. The answer is the obvious or no answer at all. Let us therefore turn to social rule learning which moves the question toward the problem of "structural" learning, of the learning of new structures for generating and reproducing knowledge.

30. In this context the question of understanding other cultures has gained momentum.

31. Obviously, knowledge has increased in modern societies. However, evolutionary theory is too general were it not able to say more than that. This is the limit of classical evolutionary theory to the social sciences. See for this argument the contributions to Schmid/Wuketits (1987).

3.3 The production of rules for learning: the learning of learning

Rule learning is different from substantive learning. Knowledge is always related to some way of organizing experience. Rule learning is social learning in the sense that knowledge is

organized and reproduced in a social life form which defines a specific set of rules of organizing and storing knowledge. Such a rule perspective leads us a further step away from the “educational model” which argues that we have to identify the educator in order to explain why social actors learn. It rather leads us to the model of self-organizing learning processes which are organized as communication processes structured by rules. Rules of communicating knowledge thus become the key to societal learning.

Rule learning can be analysed through distinguishing communicative situations that are constructed in the process of learning. I will distinguish three levels of increasing inclusiveness each having its specific property. These three levels are the interpersonal level, the organizational level, and the institutional level. These levels will be discussed in this order.

Interpersonal learning concerns situations where learning takes place through direct communication. This applies to any situation, be it among children learning collectively how to judge empirical phenomena or how to solve moral conflicts, or to the direct interaction among scientists trying to resolve contradictory evidence and reframing their ethical codes, or to political action. A first example is the study of associations, conceived as interpersonal networks created for political or cultural or social purposes. I myself dealt with this problem on the level of political associations emerging with the rise of modern civil society in Germany in the 19th century (EDER, 1985). These Enlightenment groups (“Aufklärungsgesellschaften”) not only generated a particular conceptual framework or paradigm for interpreting their political experiences, but they also learned that they were learning collectively. They learned rules through which to generate, stabilize and eventually modify their paradigms or frameworks. The logic that emerged (after some decades of ambivalence concerning the educational model, e.g. in masonry groups) can be found in the idea of a situation structured according to the principles of equality of members and discursivity of their interaction. This is close to the discourse model that Habermas identified as underlying rational practices of well-socialized social actors. Wuthnow has called them “communities of discourse” (WUTHNOW, 1990). Haas calls them “epistemic communities” (HAAS, 1992).

Scientific interaction patterns and the way in which rules for interaction have been invented and established in scientific communities has been studied in the micro-sociological work of Knorr-Cetina (1981). A historical example are the scientific societies (the Royal Society being one of the best studied ones) which were reor-

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ganizing their interpersonal relations according to the model of free and equal membership of such societies. They did not only invent new knowledge (this has been secondary), but they practised procedures for producing, checking and publishing new knowledge about the world. They invented rules for inventive work. These groups are “epistemic communities”, a label fashionable in sociology of knowledge and science in recent years (HAAS, 1992).

Organizational learning shows even more clearly the role of rules for social learning. Organizations are defined as designs for organizational learning, for acquiring information about the environment of the organization and for improving what the organization can do with its environment. To understand such organizational learning we have to know how knowledge is stored in an organization, how it is transmitted to a changing populace, how the turnover in organizations is dealt with.³² Thus organizational learning is the necessary product of any organizational form of social life. Learning is a process of seeking and processing information on the environment in order to reduce the uncertainties with which any organization is confronted when dealing with its environment. The survival of an organization is dependent upon its capacity to reduce the uncertainties of its environment through learning (SIMON, 1991).

That learning is better than maximizing advantages (exploration is better than exploitation) has been emphasized in recent literature on organizational stability. In terms of social rule learning this means that organizations have to build up routines that allow for learning. The repertoire of routines provides rules for acquiring, collecting, storing and transmitting information in an organization. Simultaneously, the relations between those who do such acquiring, storing and transmitting must be ordered by some rules of organizing communication within organizations in order to define decision premises, to frame organizational problems etc. Organizational structures are themselves a set of rules for dealing with this problem.³³

Institutional learning refers to the rules that coordinate organizational actors. Institutions learn by defining interorganizational spaces and naming these spaces. Thus institutions enable communication between organizational actors and constrain at the same time the mode of communication by normative and cognitive rules, by providing an institutionally backed moral order and by providing a cognitive landscape within which communication activities are organized.

The most encompassing level of institutional orders is the public space within which discourses take place. Discourse is meant here in the double sense of discursive universes and of discursive

32. See the contributions to “Organizational Science” in February 1991 (COHEN/SPOUL, 1991), especially the contributions by March, Cohen, Simon and Levinthal. The contribution by March (1991) is linked to the need to understand the dynamics of the logic of decision making (MARCH, 1988). An overview of the discussion on this issue is contained in Levitt/March (1988). Earlier formulations of this problem can already be found in Argyris/Schön (1978).

33. An interesting case is the application of this theory to the learning of social movement organizations. Such learning is necessary to create and reproduce collective action. Organizational learning explains in part the transformation of collective action in modern social movements. For an application of this theory to learning in the environmental field see Wynne (1992).

practices (or procedures). Institutional learning is then defined as either the result or the process of public discourse. The result is institutionalized experience of a society. The process is the staging of discourses for communicating institutionalized experience.³⁴

Modern societies are particularly shaped by discursive rules and practices. Modern institutions are bound to public consensus as the ground of their legitimacy. Institutional learning is required by the pressure to provide evidence of complying with such expectations. Myth-makers, intellectuals, and journalists all contribute to institutional learning by providing a reconstruction of institutionalized experience. By doing so they also define the rules through which such collective knowledge can be transformed. In the process of reconstructing institutionalized experience they generate a rule system based on free speech and critical debate.

This example of institutional learning is characteristic of a specific type of modern societies. Other institutional systems in modern societies generate other forms of institutional learning.³⁵ The theoretical point is that we can identify rule learning taking place in the process of the construction of institutions for coordinating a plurality of collective actors.

4 Why do societies learn?

What is a learning theory good for? Why should we bother with learning theories beyond the classic theoretical discussion of how to conceptualize the social world? This is the question of the transition from conceptual models to explanatory models. That explanatory models presuppose good and differentiated conceptual models is – for me at least – obvious. Therefore I will go on and somewhat reframe the initial question. The question is no longer: How do societies learn? The question rather is: Why do they learn? Why do they reorganize their belief systems and their knowledge?

An old answer taken up also by Habermas (1979) has been: because not-learning is impossible. The assumption is that human beings are forced by their nature to learn. This is the individualist version of causality. Humans striving for enlightenment, for knowledge are seen as the basic mechanisms of learning, and they will finally win. This is the optimistic theory of societal learning which turns out to be a secularized version of the philosophy of history. Such an answer simply begs the question of explaining societal learning.

A more recent answer explains learning as a reaction to uncertainty (SIEGENTHALER, 1993). In situations of uncertainty peo-

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34. The concept of discourse is still very malleable. It appears under Foucaultian premises and under Habermasian premises. Here we are interested in its double structure: meaning a structured system of knowledge and a practice of debating knowledge.

35. Mary Douglas would argue that we have at least four types: egalitarians, hierarchists, individualists and fatalists. See the development of her original work (Douglas 1966) into a full-blown theory of culture (THOMPSON et al., 1990).

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ple, organizations and institutions have to reorganize their rules. In phases of routine, everyday knowledge, organizational knowledge and institutionalized knowledge are sufficient to make the difference between true and false, right or wrong, good or bad. In phases of crisis such distinctions become more difficult. The cognitive rules for doing so can no longer be applied without uncertainty.

In order to change this situation of uncertainty the rules for dealing with it are put into question. Beliefs in what is collectively shared no longer hold. Learning through communication is needed. Choices within rules are no longer sufficient. New rules have to be chosen. This requires learning of new rules and the production of new certainties through new rules of communicating evidence from the world around. In modern societies such situations of uncertainty have become even normal: risk society is a term which defines late modern societies as inherently uncertain societies. It is no surprise that in risky environments the question of learning has become (as in environmental risk research) a central analytical and political category.³⁶ Such a situation, however, does not hold forever. It is a border case. Normally, people still have some secure ground on which to act rationally within rules, thus being capable of avoiding learning and following routines. There must be some basic irritation to trigger social learning processes.

When such rule learning is set in motion, it modifies the social forms through which knowledge is generated and stored. In the case of revolution, this rule system is modified even further. In such situations, the narrative order of society is destroyed. Narratives are no longer believed in, and nobody can be sure about a basic understanding of each other's symbolic worlds. Any staging of knowledge risks being ridiculed. From this follows that societies learn when their narrative order no longer provides the background certainty necessary for rituals, routines and normative orders. Learning is then found in a new narrative on which to base a social order and its culture

Such rule learning affects the state of knowledge. It delegitimizes old and generates new knowledge. The accumulation of knowledge can be organized on the basis of rule systems which offer new possibilities for adding new experience to existing knowledge and which offer new possibilities for doing away with obsolete knowledge. The rule learning of society is thus a condition of changing the mode of accumulating knowledge. A theory of societal learning is therefore not a theory of the accumulation of knowledge, but rather a theory of organizing and reorganizing rule systems for the accumulation of knowledge.

36. There is an extensive literature on risk research and the related problem of how to get around with risks, how to counter risks. A good orientation in the highly diverse debate is offered by Sabatier/Jenkins-Smith (1993), Milbrath (1989), Beck (1992) and Wynne (1992).

5. Rationality, evolution and learning

To summarize, learning is a reaction of human beings to uncertainties regarding their institutionalized experience. Knowledge no longer provides adequate answers for figuring out what the good or the bad, the right or wrong, the true or false could be. Communication about what is shared knowledge has to be triggered on the interpersonal, the organizational and even institutional level of social life.

What happens then is not that individuals simply learn and provide new meanings and new rules for going ahead, but rather that social relations have to be reorganized in order to open spaces of communication that allow the creation of new forms of knowledge or the reconstruction of old forms of knowledge. In this process social relations are themselves redefined. Rules of social relations of communication have to be found in order (a) to acquire new knowledge, (b) to store such knowledge and (c) to transmit such knowledge given the natural and/or social turnover of actors in communication settings. Learning is both creating discursive universes and entering discursive relations. Faced with the theoretical choice of a primacy of substantive or rule learning, the theoretical claim is that rule learning is methodologically prior to substantive learning. The corollary theoretical assumption is that intersubjective structures or rules are constitutive of subjective structures of knowledge.

There remains another question which is part of the title of this paper. Why is it so hard to change the world? The answer would be: because societies don't like to learn. They rather stick to what they know and to the rules that stabilize what they know. Therefore, only societies that produce risks are societies in which social actors really have an option to change the world. The riskier the environment of societies, the more they learn and the more they want to change the world. The risk society we live in today is an environment conducive to change and learning. Contrary to the bad news about "risk society", this society is one of those that even triggers learning processes (BECK, 1992). This, however, creates another problem. Too much learning is confusing. And the effects of changing knowledge and norms are beyond the reach of human intentions. Thus learning itself becomes a risk. So, would it not be better for social evolution to continue to stop learning processes? Lévi-Strauss once argued in "Tristes tropiques" for such a society. Since it is so hard to change the world, we should not change it at all but rather bind learning into cognitive and social forms.

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Unfortunately, it is too late for that. So we have to continue to live in a learning society and use our learning capacities to control the non-intended effects of our learning. Social evolution is speeding up because social learning increases. But the more social evolution goes on, the less social learning shapes the future. We try to change the world by everyday learning, organizational learning (e.g., university reformers), by institutional learning (inventing new institutions through organized collective action and social movements) and yet, society evolves rather independently from social learning processes. What we do is produce effects through social learning. The effects, however, are not determined by collective learning but by their systemic consequences: by evolution.

The illusion of high modernity has been that we believed that society learns because groups, organizations and institutions learn. However groups, organizations or institutions (not to speak of people) also die; yet society continues to evolve. We can change groups, organizations, institutions (even people), yet society seems to resist attempts to change it. At least, society does not “implement” the learning processes going on in it. There is a difference between group learning, organizational learning and institutional learning, on the one hand, and the evolution of society, on the other. Societies evolve which means what comes out often has nothing to do with group intentions, organizational goals or institutional aims do. It is through macrosocial and macrohistorical constellations that learning processes on the group, organizational and institutional level translate into societal learning. This is to say that as much as we make society society makes us.

So, should we give up the idea of societal learning? Learning is one thing, evolution is something else. We have to separate both in order to make sense of social learning processes. So what are learning processes good for? They are good for evolution because they offer more possibilities. They do not change the world, but they provide the elements for changing the world, for keeping change going. Learning processes on the group, organizational and institutional level produce variation in order to produce enough variability for the evolution of society. Learning processes on the group, organizational and institutional level produce variation and thereby make available enough variety for the evolution of society. They provide the stuff out of which society selects in its own continuous reproduction. This is evolution based on social learning processes, and in this sense societies learn.

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