Dialectical Sociology in Québec: About and Around Michel Freitag's Dialectique et Société

JEAN-FRANÇOIS CÔTÉ and DANIEL DAGENAIS

Contemporary sociology faces many challenges in the understanding and reflective expression of the transformations that affect societies in the world today. Not that it would lack theoretical models to assume its tasks, but the wide range of phenomena to fall under its scope apparently requires the development of a global perspective which also encompasses specific judgments on the evolution and transformation of things. For example, one cannot think of Niklas Luhmann's systems analysis, focusing on the characteristics of their self-reproduction, without underlining its very abstract character which deprives society of any kind of subjectivity, and deprives sociology of its critical view on the development of society (Luhmann 1990, 1998); one cannot think of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, without asking how social ideals and their universal existence can still be recognized in the rhetorical devices constructed to highlight the formal ends of social discourses (Habermas 1984); one cannot turn to Anthony Giddens's theory of "high-modernization" without having the sense of losing the capacity to analyze contemporary society according to a dire historical shift in contemporary practices that lose sight of their modern content (Giddens 1991, 1990); or again, one cannot look at Jeffrey Alexander's recent neofunctionalist attempt at theorizing culture without asking how symbolism can reappear today as the simple epiphenomenon of a functional and positivistic perspective on societal development (Alexander, 1998).

While all these theoretical attempts provide interesting and stimulating reflections, they also often lack the coherence of an approach that would prove to offer both a systematic and critical outlook on the development of contemporary society, and one which is also able to provide a normative orientation for sociological analysis, as well as a strong commitment towards social practice in

Jean-François Côté is professor at the Department of Sociology of Université du Québec à Montréal, c.p. 8888, succursale Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec, Canada, H3C 3P8. E-mail: cote.jean-francois@uqam.ca. Daniel Dagenais is professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Concordia University, 1455 boul. de Maisonneuve ouest, Montréal, Québec, Canada, H3G 1M8. E-mail: ddagenai@alcor.concordia.ca.)
general. We would like to present here some views generated by a recent sociological theory developed by, and along the lines of, Michel Freitag's *Dialectique et société*, in order to show how this specific approach differs from the ones referred to above in its fundamental orientations, and appears thus as an original development of what we call here a dialectical sociology. We will do so in presenting, in the first section, a summary of Freitag's conceptualization grounded in the onto-epistemological principles of the analysis of symbolism; the second section will give some examples of the formal and theoretical analysis of contemporary society in reference to these principles. We will conclude with a brief attempt at identifying the challenge of a dialectical sociology today, as it appears to us.

Michel Freitag was born in Switzerland in 1935. He taught at Université du Québec à Montréal from 1970 to 2000. With the coming of age, so to speak, of the second generation of students trained through Freitag's sociological theory, a research group1 consolidated itself in the eighties on two grounds: A sociological journal dedicated to theoretical and analytical debates, *Société*, published since 1987; and a series of monthly seminars, held from 1987 to 1998, under the auspices of *Groupe interuniversitaire d'étude de la postmodernité*, dedicated to: 1) the critical apprehension of theories openly discussing the nature of contemporary society, and at the same time revising theory as such (from Lyotard to Luhmann, Habermas, etc.); 2) the socio-historical analysis of the crisis of modernity, beginning with the philosophical crisis of the end of the nineteenth century up to current debates on social and societal transformations; 3) the sociological analysis of the current destiny of the main modern institutions (economy, politics, arts, family, education, etc.). Several works have been published in the wake of Freitag's theoretical framework, to which we will refer in the course of this article. Although he won one of the most prestigious Canadian awards for his book *Le naufrage de l'université* (Governor General's Award, 1996), Freitag's work remains little known in English Canada.2

**Dialectic and Society: Theory and Practice**

In the two volumes of *Dialectique et société* that have been published so far, Michel Freitag presents the main concepts and orientations that help to situate sociology in its historical and normative definitions.3 While the scope of the theory developed in *Dialectique et société* puts it within the range of a “grand theory,” or macro-sociology, the general assumption of the definitions it offers takes into account the idea that contemporary society is evolving along the lines of a postmodern condition that requires a fundamental grounding in what is called a dialectical ontology. In being essentially critical then of the prevalent opinion that a postmodern condition would not need, nor could attempt, the recognition of any fundamental grounding, *Dialectique et société* states on the contrary that such a grounding is absolutely necessary for the definition of any true comprehensive analytic endeavour. It maintains that the recognition and expression of this grounding is all the more necessary for the present state of development of contemporary society—if the latter is to escape any arbitrary determinism. Last but not least, it states that, in the name of this grounding, the