

SNOWFLAKE GENERATION AND PROBLEMS CAUSED BY PANDEMIC RESTRICTIONS. AN ANALYSIS STARTING FROM CONSTANTIN NOICA AND MAX WEBER

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to address, in the form of brief considerations, one aspect of the snowflake generation and some of the student issues arising from the pandemic restrictions imposed between 2020 and 2022. These aspects of social reality are approached from a philosophical (the way in which a concept is defined, Constantin Noica) and from a sociological (the comprehensive method of cognition. These authors prove that we can know concepts, or social facts, if we compare them with "something else": with an opposite (Noica), or with an ideal-typical construction (Weber). Thus, we see that the snowflake generation "should" (ideal-typical) be characterized predominantly by an effervescent attitude to the problems of life, but they are not. Restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic have further decreased the vitality of young people in the snowflake generation, young people with the highest rates of depression and anxiety between 2020 and 2022. In this context, online learning, being a form of interaction between young people and their peers and teachers, did not reduce depression and anxiety in these young people during the COVID-19 pandemic, although it 'should' (ideally-typically) have reduced them.

Keywords: Snowflake generation, Covid pandemic, Constantin Noica, Max Weber, E-learning.

COMPARATIVE METHOD. CONSTANTIN NOICA AND MAX WEBER

“Letters on Hermes’s Logic” is one of the significant works of the Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica, in which he deals with issues related to the possibilities of human beings to logically know the reality. The Romanian philosopher tackled the problem of being by managing to define the concept in a novel way. In relation to the present article, it is less the definition of being that is of interest than the way in which Constantin Noica defined the concept. Thus, the

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Romanian philosopher discovers the features of being by mirroring them with the opposites of the concept. In order to find out what being is, Noica lists what it is not, as follows:

“(…) Among the terms of philosophy, being has probably the most opposites. The main opposites are:

1. being and non-being
2. being and consciousness
3. being and appearance
4. being and possibility
5. being and manifestation
6. being and nature
7. being and temporality
8. being and becoming.

Each opposition could give a particular aspect of being”³⁵⁰.

The Romanian philosopher’s manner of defining a concept can be found in Max Weber’s sociological thinking. Like Constantin Noica, Max Weber discovers the traits of social reality by contrasting it not with its opposite, but with the highest form of rational abstraction of it – the ideal-type. Reality opens up to the sociologist to the extent that he succeeds in abstracting it ideotypically and empathising with the people who make it up.

“For the purposes of a typological scientific analysis it is convenient to treat all irrational, affectually determined elements of behaviour as factors of deviation from a conceptually pure type of rational action ... The construction of a purely rational course of action in such cases serves the sociologist as a type (ideal type) which has the merit of clear understandability and lack of ambiguity. [real social actions]. By comparison [social real actions] with this it is possible to understand the ways in which actual action is influenced by irrational factors of all sorts, such as affect and errors, in that they account for the deviation from the line of conduct which would be expected on the hypothesis that the action were purely rational”³⁵¹.

In order to successfully carry out this quest for knowledge, the researcher must be aware that social reality is more than his own rational interpretation. The ideal-

³⁵⁰ „(…) Dintre termenii filozofiei, cel de ființă, are, probabil, cei mai mulți opuși. Principalele opoziții sunt:

1. ființă și neființă
2. ființă și conștiință
3. ființă și aparență
4. ființă și posibilitate
5. ființă și manifestare
6. ființă și fire
7. ființă și temporalitate
8. ființă și devenire.

Fiecare opoziție ar putea da câte o trăsătură a ființei.” in Constantin Noica, *Scrisori despre Logica lui Hermes [Letters on Hermes’s Logic]*, Bucharest, Romanian Book Publishing House, 1986, p. 179.

³⁵¹ Max Weber, *Economy and society*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1978, p. 6.

type is only a starting point in the sociological quest for knowledge. Ion Ungureanu clarified the difference between social reality and concept, stating that social systems should not be superimposed entirely on sociological systems:

“As a specific system of thinking, sociology acquires the meaning of an essentialist sociological system, built to serve as a basis for interpretations and explanations of the society to be constructed. Systems of society, concrete societies, therefore, should not be confused with sociological systems. The sociological system is the set of sociological laws that can be used to derive – through research, interpretation and explanation – the social laws of concrete-historical systems (concrete, actual societies)”³⁵².

Finally, the comprehensive method will find its application in the case of the “snowflake” generation and in the case of the problems generated by pandemic restrictions among young people, but especially students.

THE SNOWFLAKE GENERATION. DIFFERENCES FROM THE YOUTH IDEAL. THE ROLE OF FAITH

Two of the ideal-typical traits of youth, the period between childhood and adulthood, are enthusiasm and effervescence. We therefore begin from the premise that a generation during youth should (ideally-typically) have an effervescent and enthusiastic attitude to the problems of life. Thus, the same attitude should also be present among young people of the snowflake generation, born between 1980–2000. However, if we look at recent statistics³⁵³, instead of the traits listed above, we find placidity, sometimes to the point of “paralysis”, in this generation. Why are these young people not characterised by effervescence? One of the possible answers to this question derives from the low degree of religiosity.

Without faith in an ideal, the snowflake generation cannot face the challenges of life, challenges that unresolved lead to depression and anxiety. Why? In the great religions of humanity are stored attitudes, which adopted by the followers of these religions, provide solutions to face the problems of life. For example, Christianity encourages the management of sadness. When it is not grief for one’s fellow man,

³⁵² „Ca sistem de gândire specifică, sociologia dobândește înțelesul unui sistem sociologic esențialist, construit adică pentru a sluji ca bază pentru interpretările și explicațiile societății ce urmează a fi construite. Sistemele societății, societățile concrete, deci, nu trebuie confundate cu sistemele sociologice. Sistemul sociologic este ansamblul legilor sociologice care pot fi utilizate pentru derivarea – prin cercetare, interpretare și explicare – legităților sociale ale sistemelor sociale concret-istorice (societățile concrete, actuale).”, in Ilie Bădescu, “Sociologia esențialistă. Un inovator al sociologiei: Ion Ungureanu” [“Essentialist sociology. An innovator of sociology: Ion Ungureanu”], in *Sociologie Românească*, Year III, no. 2/1992, p. 136.

³⁵³ Aliona Paladi, “Interconexiuni dintre locul de control și optimism” [“Interconnections between locus of control and optimism”] in *Univers Pedagogic*, No. 47/2015, p. 53.

but, in contrast, a perverse form of self-centeredness, it is strongly opposed by the holy fathers:

“[sadness] makes a man shun all good meetings and does not let a man receive a word of advice even from true friends, nor does it allow him to give them a good and peaceful answer. But, enveloping the whole soul, fills it with bitterness and carelessness”³⁵⁴.

Young people of the snowflake generation have deviated from the ideal of youth, an ideal of enthusiasm and effervescence, because they do not have the necessary attitude to face the problems of life, which is found in the great religions of the world, such as the Christian religion. In Christian thinking, sadness is to be avoided because it prevents the Christian from receiving help from his fellow human beings on his way to salvation.

E-LEARNING HAD NO SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENTS’ PROBLEMS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The effects of the lackadaisical attitude among young people were most evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when young people, but especially students, experienced the highest rates of depression and anxiety compared to other “young adults”. The “young adults” category includes those aged between 18 and 29 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research in Germany, the UK, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Portugal and Italy found that depression and anxiety have increased among adults in Europe compared to the pre-pandemic period³⁵⁵. Researchers have shown that 27% of respondents reported being depressed, while 26% described themselves as anxious. In all three waves and in all countries studied, people aged 18 to 29 (referred to as “young adults”) had the highest rates of depression and anxiety compared to other age groups³⁵⁶. In China, they reported almost double rates of anxiety (45%) and depression (43%)³⁵⁷.

Has online education – a form of social contact mediated by technology – managed to reduce these psychological effects of the lack of interaction in the pandemic? Ideally-typically, students’ daily interaction with other teachers and peers should have improved their psychological state. In reality, however, this did not

³⁵⁴ „[tristețea] îl face să ocolească toată întâlnirea cea bună și nu-l lasă să primească cuvânt de sfat nici de la prietenii cei adevărați, precum nu-i îngăduie să le dea răspuns bun și pașnic. Ci învăluind tot sufletul, îl umple de amărăciune și de nepăsare” in Dumitru Stăniloae, *Filocalia [Philokalia]*, Vol. I, Sibiu, Institute of Graphic Arts “Dacia Traiană” S.A., 1947, p. 115.

³⁵⁵ Hajek André et al, “Prevalence and determinants of probable depression and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic in seven countries: Longitudinal evidence from the European Covid Survey (ECOS)” in *Journal of affective disorders*, No. 299/2022, p. 520.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Cindy Liu et al., “Factors associated with depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptomatology during the COVID-19 pandemic: Clinical implications for U.S. young adult mental health” in *Psychiatry Research*, No. 209/2020, p. 1.

happen according to the above studies. In addition, US studies³⁵⁸ and studies from the United Kingdom³⁵⁹, which used qualitative research methods, revealed that students' interaction with other teachers and peers via the online environment did not counterbalance the decrease of social contact, on the contrary, the dialogue between students and teachers or between students and their peers had deteriorated.

The teaching and learning process does not work without a constant and fertile dialogue between teacher and students, in which the former offers knowledge and the latter receives it, but at the same time shows a desire to learn as much as possible from the teacher. From this perspective, the exercise of the capacity for dialogue (which was lacking during the online courses and seminars) is probably directly proportional to the idea of sociability, to the degree of integration of the students into the groups in the university environment.

The problems associated with anxiety and depression, amplified by the lack of social contacts during the COVID-19 pandemic, were not solved by the transition of universities to the online regime as student participation in the educational act through online platforms was rather passive and superficial.

A BRIEF SUMMARY

In this essay the philosophical method of defining a concept used by C. Noica and the comprehensive method, discovered by Max Weber, specific to sociology, have been applied to a case of interest to young people today. The method of comparing social reality with its ideal-type provided answers to two concrete research problems. Using the two methods, the present research revealed that the snowflake generation has a less effervescent attitude than the attitude of previous generations due to the lack of contact with the great religions of the world. Also, online learning, seen as a solution for further education during the COVID-19 pandemic, did not compensate for the lack of social contact, social contact that should have reduced high rates of depression and anxiety.

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