

# **Transitional Environments: understanding the changes in contemporary society**

di Cinzia Cilento

## **Abstract**

Contemporary transitions embody complex social phenomena. The sociological perspective can provide a key to understand these transitions by referring to them as four distinct environments within which the social actor-system relationship evolves. The digital transition, configured as a technical environment, involves not only the integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, but also a far-reaching transformation of the production, communication and knowledge patterns. Social actors are called upon to continuously adapt to a context of digitally mediated interaction, reformulating their role within an increasingly complex information system. The environmental transition, seen as a cultural environment, calls for a restructuring of everyday practices and collective mindsets towards greater sustainability, implying a rewriting of the values that guide interactions with the natural surroundings. The social environment, associated with the migratory transition, is characterised by inclusion and exclusion dynamics that challenge existing social structures while requiring new models of governance and multicultural coexistence. Finally, social transition, understood as the regulatory environment, entails a continuous evolution of institutions that are expected to respond to emerging social, economic and technological developments.

**Keywords:** Environment, transition, social actor, social system, socialisation.

## **Introduction**

In order to understand contemporary transitions as environments and subsystems organised in connection with each other, it is appropriate to take up some classical sociological categories in order to better delineate the epistemological framework within which the present research is oriented. Referring to the definition provided by Gallino in *Dizionario di Sociologia*, a social system represents «a complex of positions or roles, occupied or performed by individual or collective sub-

jects» (Gallino, 1978, p. 607). In particular, a social system configures a set of interdependent relationships between social actors, be they individuals or groups of individuals, who interact by virtue of shared rules and norms, aimed at satisfying predefined needs and achieving common objectives. Each social system is characterised, and can be defined as such, according to the existence of elements defined as constituent units, such as the actions and behaviours that the individuals participating in the system enact. More specifically, each social actor occupies a specific position, which determines a specific role within the social structure. Each role implies compliance with the body of rules connected to it, as well as the fulfilment of the expectations that “converge on an individual as he occupies a certain position in a more or less structured network of social relations, i.e. in a social system”.

Therefore, it is within what we call the social system that individuals exist and survive, entities interpreted and analysed by the sociological viewpoint in the light of the category of the social actor. The social actor embodies the decision-making process through which, while considering a «set of situations, that is, a limited and specific combination of social facts, resources, events, and favourable, indifferent or hostile players» (Gallino, 1992), they manage to move and, indeed, to operate within the system to which he belongs. The actor not only acts within the system in which they are embedded but also interfaces as many specific subsystems as the number of roles the individual plays. Since the individual is an ever-interacting entity, multiple and diverse will be the environments to which he socialises. For this reason, it is possible to imagine society as a macro social system, within which there are at least four environments that differ in nature, structure, and functioning, and that can be understood as containers of the four contemporary transitions.

With regard to the concept of environment, it defines what surrounds and influences a specific unit, be it an individual or a collective social actor, representing an external dimension to the social system, which to a certain extent is affected by it to the point of having its internal functioning conditioned. In addition to the external environment, for the purposes of this analysis, it is worth noting the existence of an internal environment within social systems. A social system is composed of several interconnected factors, such as the interpersonal relations existing between its members, the social structures and hierarchies defined over time, the cultural practices, the norms along with the shared values and the collective aspirations to which the social actors choose to conform in order to belong to the system, as well as

the eventual conflicts and negotiation processes aimed at maintaining order and systemic balance. Society, understood as a complex macro social system, can be divided into its constituent institutions, social norms and power relations, as “social and non-social units” (Parsons, 1951), which shape and govern the social actions of the individuals that populate it, thus referring to an internal environment that synthesises the nature of the social system concerned.

Changes and variables originating from the outside of the system represent the features of the environment surrounding the social system, which can be processed, transformed and adapted by the internal environment in order to ensure that the social system preserves its nature and succeeds in its own endurance. Both environments, external and internal, are reciprocally influenced by each other: a social system interacts constantly with its external environment, e.g. an economic crisis can be read as an extra-systemic environmental variable and as such can influence the internal dynamics of an organisation, or institution, that can be located within the system itself. At the same time, internal processes, such as culture or power structures, can be defined as decision-making and can govern the system’s responses to external stimuli, to the point of establishing the system’s ability to adapt, evolve and respond to changes (Parsons, 1951).

Therefore, the internal environment appears as a nuclear dimension of the social system of reference, and for this reason it is possible to imagine how the social actor, in being an active part of the system in which he is embedded, must socialise to at least four coexisting and interconnected environments.

Therefore, the internal environment appears as a nuclear dimension of the social system of reference, and for this reason it is possible to imagine how the social actor, in order to be an active part of the system in which he or she is inserted, must socialise to at least four coexisting and interconnected environments. Thus, while an action is social only if realised in virtue of the presence of a third party (Weber, 1992), the relations and interactions that an actor intends to establish will also be constituted as a function of a process of socialisation with the environment in which he is placed. Likewise, as a house can be analysed according to the sociological category of system, the rooms that constitute it can be interpreted as communicating environments. Consequently, it is possible to conceive a social system as a combination of four specific dimensions understood as environments: technical environment, cultural environment, social environment and normative environment.

## Technical environment and digital transition

As Negrotti states, «technology can be seen as an environment to which man is committed to adapt» (Negrotti, 1975): the technical environment thus defines the sum of tools, technologies and technical processes suitable for the social, productive or economic performance of activities. In particular, the technical environment is not only structured by material and operational elements that provide a technological infrastructure but also includes organisational processes and new interaction modalities to which individuals are forced to adapt. The technical environment thus defines the context in which social actions take place often determined and characterised by the presence of technology, understood as the full application of sciences as an instrument. Considering a company as an example, it can be sociologically analysed as a social system, where procedures, digital technologies such as automation, the use of artificial intelligence or the digitisation of certain data, define the characterising elements of the technical environment existing in the system itself.

This environment is inevitably connected to the employee who works in the company: in other words, a social actor, inserted in any social system, will necessarily have to interface a technical environment, which can influence the individual's social action through its ability to determine the possibilities and limitations to that action. At the same time, technologies as generally understood are means capable of modifying the social practices of social actors on several levels. Thinking about the introduction of remote work, it defines a technical element that has, especially in recent years following the Covid-19 pandemic, disrupted workers' habits. Effectively, there has been an almost forced adaptation of workers to new practices, such as the use of specific platforms and the way work is performed. As Anna Cerruti has argued, «one cannot neglect the problem of creating a social culture open to innovation, of awareness, i.e. of all strata of the population to technological development» (Barbano, 1996), a reflection that supports the thesis according to which to date it is impossible to believe that there is no interaction between social actors and the technical environment.

Necessarily, independently of the sphere of interest and thus of the identified social system, the individual will increasingly be obliged to interact, to relate and to use technological means and tools to perform certain tasks commensurate with the role or roles occupied by the social actor at issue.

Therefore, the technical environment defines a set of elements

indispensable to the social actor, characterised by a strong temporal mutability, due to the ever new and unpredictable technological evolutions. Therefore, the socialisation towards the technical environment becomes an indispensable process, which despite initially appearing to be a constraint, over time redefines the actor's existence in the system, as technological knowledge «leads to real, consolidated and irreversible results, which in turn will contribute to adding objects and actors to the process of constructing new knowledge» (Pievani, 2023, p. 14). Thereby, the digital transition can be read as a changing technical environment, or to be more specific, the technical environment is the context within which the digital transition process takes place.

Actually, by digital transition is meant the technological innovation related to the «network and the possibilities offered by digitisation and data-driven processes, machine learning and artificial intelligence» (Di Salvo, 2019, p. 10), elements that together, according to this proposed analysis, define the structural components of the technical environment. Looking once again at the employment sector, the relationship between workers and the technical environment determines the transformation of production processes, modifies the habits of the actors involved and, as a consequence, brings changes also in the social relations they have with third-party actors. Moreover, the space-time dimension also undergoes changes: the technical/technological environment 'penetrates every aspect of daily life' to the point that «the very perception of space and time is modified» (Bennato, 2013).

In other words, the technical environment, understood as a part of a social system, is capable of reshaping the social space-time by imposing a new speed of communication, which is not solely determined by the technological development capacity but is also intertwined with social interests that can be traced to a profound sociotechnical matrix (Hughes, 1987). By overturning Morozov's thesis, which argues that the digital defines "an actor acting on society from the outside and not as a socio-technical form emerging from within a [social] system" (Morozov, 2013), the virtual dimension can instead be analysed as an internal environment within the social system and, thus, society. It permeates every area and function of the system itself, sometimes facilitating its developments.

### **Cultural Environment and Environmental Transition**

From a Durkheimian perspective, culture represents a «social fact», i.e., a set of values, beliefs, and norms that pre-exist the indivi-

dual and have a significant influence on the actions of actors in society, defining “something already given that imposes itself on individuals” (Crespi, 2002, p. 82). Shared norms, behaviours, codes, and material objects within a community define a structure of meanings internalised by individuals, which, through various forms of transmission, are perpetuated and developed through the process of socialisation. Therefore, culture acts as a social compass, guiding the existence of social actors in the world. Although it does not always manifest itself as an entity, it steers individual and collective behaviour. Environmental transition, according to the definition provided by the *European Green Deal*, consists of the structural change process and the transformation of social systems and individual and collective practices towards sustainable development models. Reshaping individual behaviours through the recognition of new values that guide social action towards greater environmental protection and more careful resource use means rethinking the behavioural models widespread in society. Therefore, the cultural environment defines the set of value-based and normative structures through which the individual, as a member of a social system, directs their actions. In the context of environmental transition, the cultural environment serves as the driving force, indicating to the system, through values such as ecological responsibility, respect for nature, intergenerational solidarity, and collective well-being, “the path” to follow so that each member can diffuse and normalise new environmental practices. In this sense, the cultural environment modifies the dominant social values, attempting to establish new horizons of meaning based on the rethinking of cultural traditions that are no longer in line with the times. Sustainable resource management, in contrast to the use of non-renewable energy, may encounter cultural resistance in the short term, embedded within the social system. However, if embraced by social actors, it can, over time, evolve into a collective social value. Indeed, ecological transition directly corresponds to cultural change and paradigm shift: to preserve the environment, understood as the natural habitat, it is necessary to move towards a new societal model in which human activity is in harmony with nature. A profound cultural revision is essential, i.e., a «genuine reconsideration of the ontology in which humanity has placed itself, seeing humans as part of nature and nature as a complex system of relationships with intrinsic value» (Porciello, 2022, p. 302). Culture represents, if not the primary, then a key element to consider when addressing environmental transition, as, even before good practices can be implemented, an intellectual and rational awareness must first be established to restore

how values «can and must be grounded in the very structure of nature that hosts us» (Porciello, 2022, p. 305). Perception of change is, a key element in achieving environmental transition, as the way individuals and social actors interpret and respond to environmental changes is highly influenced by the culture they have internalised over time. The value systems of a society determine how much change is perceived as necessary or, conversely, as a threat to be confronted. For example, the rise of models such as the circular economy represents both a practical change, as it modifies consumption patterns, and a cultural shift that rejects the “throwaway” mentality, instead advocating for the durability of goods, responsibility regarding consumption, and awareness among those who engage with them.

### **Social Environment and Migration Transition**

Referring to Gallino, the concept of sociability defines «the general disposition of human beings to establish some kind of social relationship with others» (Gallino, 1978, p. 615), i.e., the capacity of a social actor to connect with others, actively participating in social life. Sociability, understood in this way, is, for obvious reasons, closely connected to the broader and more complex concept of the “social”, which refers to everything related to society as a system and/or the relationships and interactions between multiple individuals within a given group. The term “social” is commonly used to describe various phenomena, primarily Weber’s notion of action. For Weber, ‘social’ refers to «human action insofar as, by virtue of the subjective meaning the individual or individuals attach to it, it takes into account the behaviour of others and is in turn influenced by it» (Gilli, 2000, p. 18), highlighting two key components that distinguish social action from behaviour that is sociologically irrelevant: interaction and meaning. What gives meaning to an action is the internalisation by the acting subjects of common cultural and symbolic forms, which define and provide the basis for reciprocal relations and the co-determination of everyone’s social actions. It is meaning that ensures the establishment of social relations, which are generated on what is sociologically defined as the “double contingency” concept – the possibility and probability: the set of mutual expectations and subjectively calculated possibilities. When imagining a space where such interactions take form, the social environment can be thought of as the dimension where socialisation processes and the association between multiple acting subjects become explicitly

manifest. Therefore, by social environment, we refer to the spatial dimension within which relationships between the members of a given system occur, and these relationships are shaped by what the environment itself establishes as norms, values, and thus shared codes of behaviour. Dynamics such as inclusion, integration, or exclusion, in light of the above considerations, can be understood as processes determined by the social environment in which one is embedded. If the social environment is based on values such as cooperation and collaboration, social actors will be encouraged to model their actions towards the full realisation of a solidarity-based coexistence. On the other hand, if the social environment defines a hostile dimension, where conflict is the prevailing paradigm, the social actors involved will likely internalise the tension. The social environment and migration processes are profoundly interconnected: while the social environment dramatically influences migration dynamics, migration flows themselves modify the social structures of the systems involved. Indeed, migrations should be framed as systems of relations in movement, as they carry an evolving dynamic that requires adaptations and modifications to the environment they impact, radically altering the ways in which social relationships are constructed (Habermas, 1998).

### **Normative Environment and Social Transition**

Social norms represent «necessary tools both to implement the values to which a community adheres and to regulate the behaviours, actions, and social relations of its members» (Gallino, 1978, p. 480). The concept of a norm does not solely define prescriptions or proscriptions but also identifies the typical values of the system in which the norm operates, referring to how social actors' behaviour conforms to norms that are not necessarily categorisable as legal but stem from cultural subsystems that, in their entirety, determine and bind individual behaviour, attitude, and action. For Parsons, norms play a specific role, which is to «guide, regulate, and determine the behaviour of actors in different situations» (Crespi, 2008, p. 344), implying that the social actor, or rather the Parsonian actor, is capable and aware of the situations in which they are immersed, from which they can derive the correct and thus applicable norm. This results in the internalisation of norms through a socialisation process within the social system, a dynamic that produces the individual's recognition of a «system of sanctions and rewards» (Crespi, 2008, p. 347) aimed at maintaining social

order. Indeed, «all social systems continuously produce different types of social norms, often modifying those pre-existing» (Crespi, 2008, p. 347), and the more a society becomes differentiated, the more numerous the social norms present within it will be, prompting the social actor to interact with ever new and evolving norms. Therefore, the norm represents a fundamental element in the process of integration among members of a given social system, as it defines the means by which individuals participate, socialise, and identify with a community. The normative environment, thus, defines the complex set of norms, regulations, and ethical principles that govern the existence and actions of individuals in society, determining what is considered acceptable, lawful, and moral, and what is deemed an illegitimate expression of behaviours and actions. The management of internal conflicts within the social system, as well as the legitimation of power, inevitably passes through the systemic production and application of norms, which, in effect, constitute the reference framework within which social actors choose how to orient their actions. Social transition, understood as the process of transformation of the social fabric (Nocenzi, 2024), is strongly interconnected with the normative environment. Emerging challenges, such as the rethinking of the traditional concept of family or the intense debate on gender differences, can be interpreted as the synthesis of deeper and more rooted revolutions. The normative environment plays an extremely relevant role in facilitating or hindering such social changes, as “social and governmental policies can promote or not promote equality and fairness”. In fact, some societies «are freer» than others, thanks to the norms that govern them (Lombardi, 2005, p. 9). The legal discourse, in fact, must provide answers to the questions raised by a social phenomenon, especially within a system strongly characterised by multiculturalism; for this reason, the normative environment and social transition can be seen as two sides of the same coin, as both involve change and adaptation to behavioural and normative structures within the social system.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Starting from the sociological categories of social actor, social system, and environment, it is possible to analyse society as a macrocosm within which multiple interconnected subsystems orbit. By characterising these dimensions according to the functions and roles that differentiate them, we can speak of environments, as each refers to a social

space within which “boundaries are set and meanings are assigned” (Osti, 2010). Imagining that each system has specific characteristics, we will refer to the technical, cultural, social, and normative environments, with each one operating in a specific social sphere. Although, in the course of this brief analysis, each environment is examined as a separate entity, it is important to emphasise that despite the peculiarities ascribable to each, they share at least two variables: the presence of social actors and socialisation processes. Whether it concerns new technologies, migration phenomena, regulatory reforms, or the implementation of new paradigms for environmental perspectives, it is essential that each of the listed phenomena and processes is met with an adaptation disposition and, thus, socialisation of the actors involved. For this reason, the digital, social, environmental, and migratory transitions can be interpreted as phenomena to which the individual must respond, often rethinking his social action, viewing them as environments to which one must adapt in order to preserve and reach a holistic systemic balance.

## References

- Barbano, F. (1996). La tecnologia tra organizzazione e relazione sociale. *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 10.
- Bennato, D. (2013). *Sociologia dei media digitali: Relazioni sociali e processi comunicativi del web partecipativo*. Laterza.
- Califano, A. (Ed). (2019). *Ecosistemi digitali. Trasformazioni sociali e rivoluzione tecnologica (XXII edizione dei Colloqui internazionali di Cortona)*. Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.
- Crespi, I. (2008). L'ordine sociale in Talcott Parsons e Harold Garfinkel. *Studi di Sociologia*, 46(3).
- Di Salvo, P. (2019). Introduzione. In A. Califano (a cura di), *Ecosistemi digitali. Trasformazioni sociali e rivoluzione tecnologica (XXII edizione dei Colloqui internazionali di Cortona)*. Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.
- Gallino, L. (1978). *Dizionario di sociologia*. UTET.
- Gallino, L. (1987). *L'attore sociale*. Einaudi.
- Gallino, L. (Ed). (1992). Sulla questione dell'attore sociale. *Quaderni di Sociologia*.
- Gilli, G. A. (2000). *Manuale di sociologia*. Bruno Mondadori.
- Habermas, J. (1998). *L'inclusione dell'altro. Studi di teoria politica* (L. Ceppa, Ed). Feltrinelli.
- Hughes, T. P. (1987). *The social construction of technological systems: New directions in the sociology and history of technology*. The MIT Press.
- Lombardi, L. (2005). *Società, culture e differenze di genere. Percorsi migratori e stati di salute*. Franco Angeli.
- Morozov, E. (2013). *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*. PublicAffairs.
- Negrotti, M. (1975). *Sociologia dell'ambiente tecnico: Saggio sull'equilibrio futuro del sistema cultura tecnica*. Franco Angeli.
- Nocenzi, M. (2024). Transizione sociale. In R. Ricucci & A. Sannella (Eds), *Dizionario di sociologia per la persona* (pp. 172–175). Franco Angeli.
- Osti, G. (2010). *Sociologia del territorio*. Il Mulino.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. The Free Press.
- Pievani, T. (2023). Latour e la pluralità dei mondi. Introduzione. In B. Latour (Ed), *Disinventare la modernità* (pp. 7–25). Elèuthera.
- Porciello, A. (2022). Transizione ecologica: tutela dell'ambiente o promozione del mercato? L'insostenibilità dell'economia sostenibile. *Etica & Politica*, 3, 301–321.
- Weber, M. (1992). *Economia e società*. Edizioni di Comunità.