Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to Studying Social Reality

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Abstract. The processes occurring in Russia are pressing for the search for new infrastructure development and social development models. In the context of the ongoing crisis the government and the society must solve the common issue of qualitative changes in the life of the country, economic and social development. In this regard, studying social reality is becoming more relevant. The purpose for this research is to analyze the main approaches to the concept, nature and ways of forming social reality as the research object of social philosophy and sociology. Philosophical approaches to the nature and formation of social reality, which are based on works of European scholars of the 19-20th century, reflect the essence of this phenomenon in a number of ways. Modern world is characterized by an increasing importance of virtual reality, the opportunities of which are widely used for the formation of public

consciousness. According to analysis results, profound sociological study of social reality requires the use of achievements of all philosophical schools and approaches. Without their integration, the image of social reality will be one-sided, which will make in impossible to apply the research results for effective social management.

Key words: reality, social reality, virtual reality, structure of social reality, theoretical and methodological approaches.

The processes taking place in modern Russia and globally strongly demand new patterns of development of various societies. The regulation of these processes is possible with their research, implementation of effective public control, as well as communication between the object and subject of social management. Amid the ongoing crisis, the government and society should deal with their common objective of achieving qualitative changes in life in the country, its economy, its social, spiritual and cultural spheres [1, p. 100].

The dynamic nature and complexity of the modern world being filled with virtual elements providing unprecedented opportunities for constructing social reality, managing social processes, opening up new horizons for social opportunities and social progress, requires profound knowledge of the social reality confronting people as a result and goal of social activities [26, p. 5]. In this regard, a comprehensive study of social reality becomes a pressing issue for modern science – social philosophy and sociology.

The purpose for this study is to analyze the main approaches to the nature and definition of social reality and ways of its formation in the modern world.

The concept of social reality. The concept of "social reality" has recently been introduced in the everyday life of humanities and is mainly used in Russian social philosophy, sociology, and interdisciplinary research at the interface of these sciences. It was introduced into scientific discourse by the founder of phenomenological sociology Alfred Schütz in 1952. However, the term "social reality" in modern scientific literature has not yet been clearly defined and is quite often used by researchers as a synonym to terms such as "social being", "social life", "society", "social actuality" [32].

Social reality is everything created by man and is the objectified result of human subjective activities. Since the very inception of sociology as a science there have existed two opposite approaches to understanding the society: it is either conceptualized as the society developing according to objective laws, which, just like the laws of nature, may be the subject of scientific research of all human activities, or, conversely, is treated as a field of chaotic action of "natural forces" [23,

pp. 8–9]. As noted by G.V. Osipov, "social reality is not something given to humanity from the other world, but a product of their own activity. All the positive and negative characterizing social reality is the result of people's social activity... The laws of social development operate in objective reality which humanity has created" [23, p. 9].

In a narrower, sociological sense, social reality is a particular aspect, a feature of social life directly related to phenomena and processes of human interaction at various levels.

In the very narrow sense, social reality is a society not limited by any spheres of public life but present in forms of human interaction [20, p. 129].

The purpose of the term "social reality" is to transfer and fix the current state of sociality with transitional nature and communicative unpredictability, lack of social order and stability [12, p. 115].

For the philosophical understanding of reality it is important to consider it not only in static, time-specific state, but also in dynamics, revealing the mechanisms and determinants of its changes [10, p. 232].

In the philosophical science of the early and latest modern period it is possible to distinguish three ways of interpreting social reality.

1. The classical type of philosophizing (17–19th centuries) defines it as a transcendent reality.

2. Phenomenological philosophy and sociology (E. Husserl, A. Schütz) considers it as an immanent reality.

The phenomenological approach to understanding the nature of social reality, which absolutizes its subjective aspect, is based on the philosophical theory of E. Husserl. According to the supporters of this concept, social reality in the society has no objective, independent existence, but is created in the course of collective communication between people and is a joint inner, spiritual experience of individuals.

3. Late classical philosophy (postmodernism) considers it as a virtual reality [19, p. 125].

The fundamental methodological requirement to every type of philosophizing is the possibility of acquiring true knowledge and liberation from delusion and distortion (illusion) of reality, the search for the source of illusory forms of reality.

Classical philosophy puts the exclusion of subjective characteristics of reality as a necessary condition for the adequate cognition process. At the same time, the model of classical science treats social reality as a primordial reality, i.e. as an object [7, p. 133]. Under this doctrine, the objective is opposed to the subjective (individual, apparent) and does not depend on the subject's will. The method of objective reality cognition is the observation over the external world and measurement

of its intrinsic parameters for establishing sustainable trends and patterns [24, p. 178].

Depending on the type of objectivity, there are three levels of existence:

— the level of objective reality;
— the level of subjective reality;
— the level of transcendent reality.

The first implies the properties and characteristics of existence which are not dependent on the object which perceives or feels it. These can be both natural and social objects [3, p. 167]. The second level is formed by objects objectified by people's consciousness and will — things, phenomena and processes of a derivative nature. According to M. Weber, it is called "enchanted reality", culture which embodies both spiritual and material values reflecting initial reality [6, p. 212]. However, being created by people, it can serve as an alien force imposed from the outside.

The third level includes transcendent objects beyond space and time, beyond perception and feeling, imperceptible through scientific knowledge or common sense (e.g., manifestations of religious zealousness).

Researchers highlight the main meanings of "social reality".

First, the ontological meaning, where it represents all objectively existing social phenomena and processes. It is important to consider that in modern society, there is a continuous process of transition from subjective to objective phenomena. Different

ideas and images of science, art and religion, being objectified, become objective phenomena manifested in human activities in real life [15; 25].

Second, the epistemological meaning which is close to the concept of "life". In this case, it is understood as a spiritually and practically developed world of public relations from the perspective of both the objective, logical, essential, and accidental, subjective [10, p. 237].

In the modern period, ideas about the nature of social reality are changing. It no longer appears as a kind of a homogeneous structure which, with all its diversity and complexity, is determined by a common core or a driving force. The principle of methodological pluralism suggests that the nature of social reality, despite the fact that it contains some socio-cultural universals, is heterogeneous and structurally diverse [11].

The social and philosophical reflection of the nature of social reality uses different approaches and methods.

The anthropological approach considers a human as the main criterion of established models of communication and social constructs. It helps justify the micro-level of the research, examine the social intersubjective relations in the social system.

The sociocultural approach represents a view on the society as an expression of cultural and social unity.

The systemic-structural approach is characterized by holistic analysis and helps see the system of social life where all aspects are closely related to each other.

The activity approach provides the understanding that the meaning of concepts and ideas is generated by human activities and occurs as a result of the processes of objectification and desobjectification.

The functional approach to the study of social and cultural phenomena helps consider the functions of phenomena and processes as system units in relation to society as a holistic system.

The semiotic approach is significant as it represents social reality and the information society as systems symbolically generated by individuals, which are clearly expressed by different symbols and signs.

From the position of **the synergetic approach** it is important to study the patterns of evolution of complex dynamic systems and their self-management.

The phenomenological approach helps consider the analyzed objects and structures as "phenomena" or values constituted by activities of the human mind.

The existential approach may consider social reality as successive conditions [8, pp. 64–65].

Social reality is a multi-dimensional phenomenon which is better conceptualized in the form of two intersecting continuums: subjective/objective and micro/macro. It is the objectification of people's subjective actions, along with being the unintended consequence aggregate actions of many individuals playing for their own hand [23, p. 17], the manifestation of human creative activities [22].

In the history of philosophy there have developed different theoretical approaches to issue of the sources of changes in social reality which can be reduced to two generalized positions. The first considers social changes as the objectification of spiritual meanings, consequences of cultural factor impact. In particular, M. Weber explained the emergence of capitalist economy by changes in religious and ethical attitudes. The second position is contained in the Marxist philosophy connecting the source of social changes with non-ideal factors, mainly with the contradictions between productive forces and production relations [10, p. 232].

The representatives of the positivism sociology almost identify reality with sociality, which is understood as an objective social structure or social functions.

Antipositivists trends in social philosophy are put forward by the representatives of the Frankfurt school in an attempt to overcome the distinction between subject and object in social cognition and social activity [9, p. 6].

The anthropological approach in understanding social reality emphasizes the role of culture and the individual's subjective world in shaping reality.

E. Husserl, P. Berger, T. Luckmann, and A. Schütz consider the construction of social reality as a process consisting of the formation of pre-scientific experience and scientific theories.

Modern researchers highlight the activity approach of reality construction and build relations between social existence and social reality [30, p.5].

The image of social reality is the product of meaning-making of many social actors. According to P. Berger and T. Luckmann, when communicating, social agents maintain social reality, its "pronunciation" [4]. In other words, the reality humans live in is not just their reality, their vision of the society; it is the vision formed in communication acts with others [2, p. 1624]. This thesis marks the withdrawal form the classical understanding of social reality as an objective entity independent from a human, as well as from defining communication as simple data transmission.

According to P. Bourdieu, the decisive role in the reproduction and objectification of a certain type of social reality belongs to *habitus* — "a system of dispositions generating and structuring agents' experience and ideas. It helps the agent spontaneously orientate themselves in the social space ...and react to events and situations" [5, p. 65].

In recent decades, the issue of social reality has been discussed in many scientific works, some of which contain philosophical analysis and deal with the issues of studying this phenomenon. Under informatization of the modern society, studying virtual reality, including its philosophical analysis, becomes increasingly relevant.

Some works are related to studying specific phenomena and properties of social reality. In particular, philosophers consider the following phenomena: trust, risk, myth, routine, mass fashion, social advertising and social psychology. The characteristic feature of social reality is its obvious and iconic nature.

The applied importance of research on design and simulation of social reality, mechanisms and ways of its formation. For example, the researchers study the role of game, success, fashion, social and political processes and manipulation practices.

The researchers study the manifestations of social reality which are: the Russian statehood, city and communication space.

Thus, the study of social reality in the Russian science, judging by the ratio of the number of studies, is mostly conducted by philosophers; social reality itself is the focus of social philosophy and sociology, though to a lesser extent.

The structure of social reality. Social reality is considered not only as the result and purpose of social actions, but also as an ideal construction helping people act in the society, i.e. social reality is constructed by a subject acquiring the form of idea.

It is a complex existence having different levels of interpenetrating elemental and structural organization. P. Bourdieu notes that the world "is presented as a highly structured reality" [5, p. 195].

Ideas about reality as a complex structure makes understanding and interpretation of the concept more difficult. Some researchers distinguish individuals, groups and communities as structural elements (P. Sztompka), interaction, relations, and people's attitudes; other — social systems consisting of ideal elements (beliefs, perceptions, etc.) [27, p. 108].

Theoretical approach of P. Sztompka suggests two levels of social reality: individuals and communities. The first are individuals, the second includes abstract social entities representing a specific social reality (society, culture, civilization, socio-economic formations) [31].

According to J. Habermas, an individual is inseparable from social reality and is in constant interaction with others, which in turn defines themselves: "The identity of my personal self is marked by collective identifications, the story of my life is included in complex life relations" [28, p. 14]. However, in the modern society, the human identity is their unity not only with the real world, but also with the virtual environment — the imagined, artificially created communities [13, p. 111].

The most common interpretation of virtual reality in the mass consciousness is its understanding as an artificial reality occurring in the interaction of human and computer. It is in this sense (the reflection of new possibilities of information technology) that the concept of virtual reality became popular in the 1980—s. From this point of view, virtual reality exists as the aggregate result of information technology impact. In the narrowest sense, virtual reality is defined as reality created by computer devices used for training or developing the reactions required from an individual in certain situations. More generally, it is accepted that computer virtual reality does not necessarily have to simulate the properties of a physical world, it can be conditional.

The socio-philosophical and sociological approaches to studying social reality. Sociological research of social reality is, as a rule, of empirical and socio- nominalistic character. The socio-philosophical approach helps establish the place of social reality in the structure of an integral world image, as well as define its significance. Social reality is conceptualized to a greater extent than it is cognized. This is the strong point of research in social philosophy. Their disadvantages include value overload leading to the fact that cognition results become suppressed by personal interests of specific social groups and individuals.

The main advantage of the sociological approach is the willingness to create images of social reality based on empirical materials rather than on speculative generalizations, therefore, the sociological images of the world have a high degree of accuracy [21, pp. 285–286]. At the same time, due to the variety of social phenomena the researchers are constantly forced to interrupt the empirical consideration and proceed to generalizations, which makes it impossible to construct a complete image of social reality within the sociological paradigm. The best result in studying social reality can be achieved through synthesis of these approaches.

The study of social reality raises the issue of the reliability of data supplied by the social sciences. Social indicators are tools for monitoring social reality, which provide the idea of its current state, transformations, development trends, and crisis phenomena.

Social indicators are currently widely used in the social science, both at the national and international levels. These mostly include official statistics.

Monitoring of social development and forecasting its trends are essential elements of social construction aimed at preventing the negative and creation of desirable consequences. The special nature of the measurement techniques of social reality depends on the complexity of the measured object which is a multi-dimensional subjective-objective phenomenon [23, p. 17].

The subjective-objective nature of social reality suggests that in addition to the objective part of social phenomena, which are traditionally paid considered by social statistics, individuals' and groups' subjective attitudes to these phenomena should also be recorded. That means that social indicators should not only give an idea about the objective living conditions (income, housing conditions, etc.), but also indicate people's attitude to them (satisfaction, expectations, changes, etc.). If the former mainly present quantitative characteristics of conditions of social change, capture the overall course of processes and are, as a rule, included in the so-called "social infrastructure", the latter indicate the qualitative characteristics of the ongoing changes from the point of view of implementation of social objectives.

Here is an example from the experience of the Institute of Socio-Economic Development of Territories of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The Institute regularly conducts public opinion monitoring[1], which reflects in detail the subjective part of social reality. Monitoring records: the population's estimates

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[1] Monitoring has been conducted since 1996 every two months. 1.500 people aged 18 and over are surveyed in two cities – Vologda and Cherepovets, and 8 municipal districts (Babayevsky, Velikoustyugsky, Vozhegodsky, Gryazovetsky, Kirillovsky, Nikolsky, Tarnogsky, Sheksninsky). The sample representativeness is ensured by the following conditions: urban/rural differential ratio; the ratio between the population of settlements of different types (rural towns, small and medium-sized cities); the sex-age structure of the region's adult population. The survey technique is questionnaire survey by the respondents' place of residence. The aampling error does not exceed 3%.

Vologda Oblast population's evaluations of personal financial status
and social well-being, in % of respondents

Variant	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Evaluations of patience												
Everything is not so bad, it is possible to live; it's difficult to live, but it is tolerable	71.7	70.6	74.1	78.1	71.8	71.3	74.8	76.5	79.3	80.8	78.4	78
It is no longer possible to put up with such a distressful situation	19.1	17.5	13.6	12.5	17.9	17.5	15.3	15.8	14.2	12.5	14.5	15.6
Index*	152.6	153.1	160.5	165.6	153.9	153.8	159.5	160.7	165.1	168.3	163.9	162.4
Evaluations of social sentiment												
Excellent mood, normal stable condition	58.0	59.3	63.6	67.0	53.0	62.1	63.1	67.3	68.6	69.4	68.6	68.0
I experience strain, irritation, fear and sadness	36.5	33.3	28.3	26.8	38.2	33.0	29.0	27.1	26.5	24.9	25.9	26.2
Index*	121.5	126.0	135.3	140.2	114.8	129.1	134.1	140.2	142.1	144.5	142.7	141.8
Evaluations of financial situation												
Good	9.2	14.9	14.7	14.3	9.0	8.1	9.6	10.1	10.5	11.2	7.8	9.3
Poor	36.6	23.3	22.2	24.0	32.8	32.9	29.8	27.4	28.2	28.1	31.2	32.6
Index*	72.6	91.6	92.5	90.3	76.2	75.2	79.8	82.7	82.3	83.1	76.6	76.7

* To calculate most indices (if something else is not specified) the share of negative answers is subtracted from the share of positive answers and then added 100 to avoid negative values. Thus, completely negative answers would give the aggregate index 0, positive – 200, the balance of both is expressed by the index value 100, which is , in fact, neutral.
Source: monitoring data of ISEDT RAS public opinion survey.

of the political and economic situation in the country/region; their perception of the most acute issues of modern life; assessment of their financial status; the level of consumption and consumer sentiment; social well-being and satisfaction with life; attitude to government policies; level of social trust in social and political institutions; degree of social tension and potential of social protest; social capital and civil society development capacity; evaluation of personal security and order; attitude towards media activities [18].

In particular, the oblast's residents are characterized by a rather weak wish for changes. The share of those who believe that "it is no longer possible to put up with such a distressful situation", has not exceeded 20% since 2005 (*Table*). People's attitudes remain stable: the respective index has not reduced since 2009 (ranging from 129 to 145).

However, the stability of social well-being does not mean that these social goals are achieved. Evaluations of financial situation in 2016 are low: almost one third of the

region's residents characterize it as "bad" (33%), and only one in ten have an opposite opinion (9%). During 2005−2016, the corresponding index does not reach the mark of 100 points.

The researchers note that in modern Russia, just like in many other countries, there has emerged and strengthened the civilization syndrome of "double reality" − "updated" and tailored to its recipient, the "second" reality is beneficial to the authorities because it helps avoid responsibility for the failure to solve the urgent problems and fulfil their obligations [1, p. 100].

The social reality of the USSR had a variety of imitation strategies: "stage lifestyle"; symbolic design; mythologization and simplification; ideological indoctrination [29, p. 292]. This also influenced the process of globalization of the modern world based on the development of industrial, information and social technologies. In order to manipulate public consciousness virtual technology replacing reality began to be used, which have been tested as computer models and helped make social relations simulated [19, p. 127].

The leading role in the formation of social reality belongs to media sources. Although the reconstruction of the world image is largely based on perceptions of reality, people most often deal with the reality of the second order − the media reality. Currently, the media provides a much wider access

to learning social reality. This creates an impression that the media "ignore" the most important and urgent socio-economic issues [14, p. 23; 16; 17].

At the same time, mass media have a partial and selective impact on the society. According to the framing theory, the audience creates its own version of social reality and perception and action schemes, partly based on selectively processed media reports, but mostly − based on personal experience and interpersonal communication.

Thus, social reality is a complex and structured phenomenon, defining the essence of which is determined by the choice of particular philosophical approaches out of the whole variety. Therefore, to obtain meaningful results enabling their application for improving the efficiency of social management, the study of social reality must be based on the theoretical and methodological approaches developed by various philosophical schools. Without their integration, the image of social reality will be one-sided, which will not help apply the research results for effective social management.

The authors have defined the main trends in the study of social reality: its individual properties and phenomena (trust, risk, myth, mass fashion, routine, social advertising, social psychology); mechanisms and ways of its formation (game, success, fashion, social and political processes, manipulation practices); virtual reality, etc.

As established above, social reality is often studied in the framework of social philosophy, rather than sociology. The authors believe that improve sociological research the most appropriate would be to apply the activity based approach based primarily on an individual, reflecting their role in creating the "context" of their existence. It helps study the dynamic characteristics of objects and social mechanisms more effectively, evaluate social processes and describe the content of social reality.

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