Sociology in an Age of Relativism and Uncertainty

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By

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1.

STARTING POINTS FULL OF UNCERTAINTIES

When we observe the social world around us, we see certain relatively stable objects, others that change shape or position, and also fluid entities- with all sorts of interactions, connections and communications between them. Everything, however, is in motion, with movement, as a whole and in its individual parts, of varying degrees of orderliness or disorganization, unequal orientations, differing speeds, and various specialization towards diverse missions and goals. Many phenomena we may understand, in some we are even involved or drawn into by participation as actors – in main or secondary roles, or as "extras" ("background actors"). For many phenomena we are just observers, and as such we can understand what we observe to one degree or another, but often we have no sense what is happening in front of us, and indeed, sometimes we may not perceive them at all.

Here then – somewhat incidentally– the question arises of whether it is acceptable if the world, as seen by an individual human actor, usually differs from the descriptions presented to us in the theoretical sociological literature. Certain doubts or suspicions may arise as to whether something is missing in social science theory, something essential that is not captured in the network of sociological concepts.

1.1 Theoretical and layman's view of the world

The theoretical picture of the world is different from the one conveyed to us by human senses; it is not usually so demanding when it comes to our perceptions, as it usually has a schematically simplified structure. It can often be based on a reduced number of individual participants and a reduced number of factors that influence their actions, but often, on the contrary, it can refer to scales that are not accessible to our empirical experience: theoretical models can take into account much larger numbers of individual

participants and collectivities and completely different dimensions of space-time beyond that of ordinary human imagination.

The theoretical picture provided by sociology is mostly thematically focused, in such a way that it deliberately captures a certain specific area (a macro-, meso- or micro-social perspective) of social reality. The characters of individual and collective actors, their actions, mutual relationships and the rules according to which they operate, can be described as ideal types in such schematic images – whether or not we are followers of Max Weber's theory. It may seem surprising, then, that those who create these – often simplistic and simplifying – theoretical images of the social world believe that what they present in them is a truer, deeper and better defining reality than the image of society created by sociological laymen.

After all, most sociologists are convinced that even if social actors as lay sociologists enter the actions of the social world equipped with certain theories, nevertheless, in the process of knowledge, it is necessary to reinterpret these lay theories from the position of science in a procedure sometimes referred to as double hermeneutics. To this, however, one must add that in a certain way lay and professional theories are close to each other, arising in the process of reflection on what takes place at the micro-social and to some extent the meso-social level of reality. It can even be assumed that at these two levels the discrepancy between lay and theoretical knowledge may not be too great, which means that both parties – experts and laymen – can understand each other concerning a subject of common interest.

Where, on the contrary, there are the most differences in this direction is the macro-reality, where lay actors, if they think at all on this level, usually do so mediated by mass media and cultural creations. Macro-reality goes well beyond lay individual experience, both in terms of space and time, and in terms of the structures and processes taking place there. At the same time, it is precisely this part of social reality which, with its influences, affects to one degree or another what we experience at the micro- and meso-social levels, and can make us feel that we live in a world that we no longer understand, an age of relativity and uncertainties. And so, we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation where the effort to understand things that elude us

leads us to the need to develop a sociological theory, even though it may seem far from reality.

1.2 The multi-paradigmatic nature of sociology: how to deal with it?

From its beginnings to the present day, the development of sociology has been characterized by a significant plurality of opinions where no one stream of thought, school or theory has dominated. Thus, it can be referred to as a *multiparadigmatic* science. If we understand (with T. S. Kuhn) *the paradigm* as a complex of opinions and conceptions which determine the choice of scientific problem and method of solution, we must state that in the history of sociology– from the mid-19th century– a greater or lesser range of paradigms have existed side by side.

The differences between these strands of sociology are often the result of certain contradictions and theoretical dilemmas dividing sociological thought into opposing camps. There are numerous such oppositions and dilemmas. Among the most important are conceptual contradictions: consensus *vs* conflict, individualism *vs* holism, micro- *vs* macro-perspective, positivism *vs* anti-positivism, quantitative *vs* qualitative methodology; - we will touch on most of these to a greater or lesser extent in the following discourse.

Georg Kneer and Markus Schroer observe that the term paradigm in sociology is usually associated with basic theoretical orientations or grand sociological theories. The relationship between these can be viewed from five perspectives: 1. convergence, emphasizing similarity and the possibility of mutual approximation; 2. integration, which states differences, but nevertheless admits the possibility of integration; 3. competition, which understands theoretical discourse as a field of conflict or mutual competition; 4. complementary, which is a moderate version of the foregoing one, associated with the division of labour and complementarity within the theoretical field; 5. indifferent, dominated by mutual indifference [Kneer, Schroer 2009: pp. 7-12]. The interrelationships between these different paradigms will form part of the focus of this book. As foreshadowed in

previous books, our approach may be termed critical eclecticism and reconfigurationism (e.g. [Šubrt 2023]).

With the term eclecticism, we acknowledge – albeit in a selective manner – the intellectual heritage of sociology, and the desirability of building on and drawing from it. The method to be used is reconfigurationism, emphasising that a certain general theoretical framework is required if the eclectic mixing of different influences is not to lead to just some non-conceptual, chaotic mix.

In previous works, the concept of process was deemed to connect this plurality of approaches, to form a comprehensive interpretive model, while allowing for the specificity of partial theoretical perspectives. Social process is a dynamic category characterised by a certain flux where some things are preserved (continuity) while others are slowly or radically changed (discontinuity). Structuralist approaches can be applied in the analysis of processes but must take into account temporal and dynamic, developmental aspects. In addition, methodological individualism, constructivism, or functional analysis can be applied as specific perspectives when researching processes, but always mindful that monitoring processes from a given perspective is limited and can contribute only partially to an adequate view of reality. In sum, thinking about social reality to a greater extent from a processual perspective brings new possibilities not only within the framework of sociological theory, but also in sociological research methodology.

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2.

THE RULES OF SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD: DURKHEIM, GIDDENS, AND WHAT NEXT?

Sociological thought has been shaped by various facts and influences; not just by the logic of internal scientific development, but by the problems faced by society at any given time, reflected not only within other social sciences, but also in the political-ideological considerations into which sociology, or one of its relatives, intervenes. Alain Touraine [1988: 3 ff.] in *Return of the Actor* posits that sociology could not have arisen before the problems it addresses.

 In this sense, the beginnings of sociology are historically connected with the emergence of modern society, and the discipline itself was conceived as a science to solve problems brought about by fundamental social transformation. The founder of sociology, Auguste Comte [1908: pp. 283-387], conceived the program of sociology as a combination of social statics and social dynamics. Statics was to analyse the conditions of social stability, cohesion and balance; while Dynamics was to explore the possibilities and paths of smooth progressive development [Keller 1992: pp. 8-9].

Comte's thinking was guided by metaphor, seeing society as a kind of "organism", corresponding to his positivist philosophy and related sociological approaches inspired by natural science. The leading paradigm was thus positivism, later reflected in the work of Comte's follower Herbert Spencer [1966b], who fused the idea of the social organism with the conception of evolutionary development, where biological and social organisms were, at the initial stages of their development, small, simple, and internally undifferentiated, while further development resulted in enlargement and internal differentiation, increasing complexity. A certain culmination of this in the history of sociological thought was the positivist program presented by the leading personality of the French sociological

school, Emile Durkheim, following up critically on the work of Comte and Spencer.

2.1 Rules

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) entered the professional scene when it was still necessary to defend and explain sociology's claim to an independent existence within the framework of established sciences. Thus, Durkheim saw his primary task to establish: a) the subject of sociology, b) its differentiation from other scientific disciplines, and c) its basic method. In other words, Durkheim started from the assumption that a science requires a precise definition of its object and a determination of its specific method. In polemic with his contemporary Gabriel Tarde [1898], a follower of psychologism, Durkheim tried to define sociology so that its object was distinguishable from that of psychology.

Tarde's perspective was unacceptable to Durkheim mainly because it implicitly made sociology unnecessary; by accepting psychologism we must ultimately conclude that the investigation of social phenomena, reflecting the phenomena of the individual psyche, necessitated only one science in principle: psychology.

Durkheim formulated his program for sociology in 1895, after the publication of *The Division of Labour in Society* [Durkheim 1997 (1893)], giving his new work the title *The Rules of Sociological Method* (*Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* [Durkheim 1982 (1895)]. He developed many ideas from Comte's original conception of sociology, primarily in positivist style. Although mentioned in Durkheim's book as a correction to this way of thinking (perhaps we could even say a "cultivation"), this work has been understood for many decades – and not mistakenly – as a positivist manifesto.

In general, social-scientific thinking has been intertwined with ideological thinking to varying degrees from its beginnings to the present day. It must be said of Durkheim, however, that [1972: 155 ff] he endorsed none of the great ideologies of his time – conservatism, liberalism or socialism – but rather distanced himself from them, believing that in contemporary society

the solution of social problems should be examined and demonstrated scientifically.[1]

Durkheim's thinking was termed "sociologism" by many commentators, because social reality was understood as a special quality untransferable to individuals. However, we could also talk about "collectivism" (among the key categories of his sociology was "collective consciousness") and also "holism".[2] Moreover, Durkheim's thought was characterized by what is sometimes called "sociological imperialism", which means the tendency to subordinate other disciplines concerned with social reality to sociology; this was not least true of philosophy itself (Durkheim and followers assumed, for example, that the basic categories of human thought, and therefore philosophy, had a social origin, as if "abstracted" from social reality. [Durkheim 1995: 440 ff.]

Although Durkheim is understood as a positivist, he was not nearly as clear about the leading position of the natural sciences as his sociological successors. On the one hand, he agreed that the social sciences should be approached with the same rigorous method as the natural sciences, but on the other he rejected the relatively widespread naturalism of his era, as he did not consider the explanation of social phenomena based on natural scientific knowledge to be permissible in sociology. Thus, he rejected all efforts to base sociological thinking on the starting point of the individual.[3]

Durkheim understood society as a reality of a special kind, not as a mere sum of individuals. The whole could be identified with the sum of its individual parts because it had specific qualities distinctive from them. Interpreting group phenomena based on individuals, we would never

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[1] These problems, stressed by Durkheim's socialist ideology, evidenced in his book on The division of labour in society [1997 (1893)] were considered as marginal, to be overcome by the further development of capitalism.
[2] Holism (from the Greek *holos* - whole) is a philosophical and scientific opinion according to which the whole (or a system as a certain structured and ordered whole) is more than just the sum of its elements and parts. In the 20th century, this view was associated with the names Jan Christiaan Smuts [1961 (1926)] and John Scott Haldane [1931].
[3] A starting point that dominates a significant part of the sociological thinking to this day (see methodological choice, rational choice theory, analytical sociology).

understand reality [Durkheim 1982 (1895): 129]. Collective consciousness was different from the consciousness of individuals. "The group thinks, feels and acts entirely differently from the way its members would act if isolated." [Ibid.: 129] Social reality could not therefore be explained by reference to individuals and their individual actions, but on the basis of its own principles.

Durkheim considered society a supra-individual reality based on cooperation resulting from the division of labour and collective ideas such as law, religion or morality. Compared to individuals, society was a superior, more complex, richer and more permanent whole. As Durkheim put it: "The authority to which the individual bows, when he acts, thinks or feels, socially dominates him to such a degree because it is a product of forces which transcend him and for which he consequently cannot account. It is not from within himself that the external pressure comes which he undergoes; it is therefore not what is happening within himself, which can explain it." [Ibid.: 134]

According to Durkheim, there were numerous reasons why society could not be transferred to a sum of individuals: People cooperating behave differently than they would as isolated individuals. The social reality in which they move is an established reality to which a large number of people have contributed. In *The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life*, he observed that: "We speak a language we did not create; we use instruments we did not invent; we claim rights we did not establish; each generation inherits a treasury of knowledge it did not itself amass, and so on. We owe these varied benefits of civilization to society, and although in general we do not see where they come from, we know at least they are not of our own making." [Durkheim 1995: 214] The authority of collective consciousness is thus largely constituted by the authority of tradition. After all, we do not even invent our own religion, but follow existing religious schools, adapting our ways of thinking, feeling and acting to those recognized in society-otherwise we encounter censure, coercion, and sanctions. Such forces pressure us to submit.

Comte's positivism is especially reflected in Durkheim's ideas of sociological method. For Durkheim, the subject of sociology was "social

facts", different from those studied by other sciences (biology, psychology, etc.). In the first chapter of *The Rules of Sociological Method*, devoted to answering the question "What is a Social fact?" [Durkheim 1982 (1895): 50-59], these are defined as sui generis facts, by nature irreducible to the facts of individual lives.

This most basic of these social facts, according to Durkheim, was collective consciousness, which could be said to enable the emergence of sociology itself. Durkheim not only distinguished between individual and collective levels of consciousness but deemed that collective consciousness could not be interpreted on the basis of the individual psyche.[4] Durkheim saw the causes of the emergence of collective consciousness not in the states of individual consciousness, but in the conditions of society as a whole.

Durkheim defines a social fact as: "any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint; or: which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations." [Ibid.: 59] Examples of social facts include: religion, language, law, customs, money, work practices, or fashion.

According to Durkheim, social facts are [Ibid.: 35 ff.] generally characterized by two basic features:

1. They are supra-individual, existing outside the individual and entering consciousness as something external and independent of the will.
2. They exert social pressure on the individual, being endowed with coercive power to which individuals submit. [Ibid. 44 ff.][5]

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[4] According to Durkheim individual consciousness is thus often unable to capture reality adequately, so that even we ourselves are unable to objectively assess the motivations of our own actions.

[5] In *The Rules of Sociological Method* Durkheim explains the supra-individual character of social facts: "When I perform my duties as a brother, a husband or a citizen and carry out the commitments I have entered into, I fulfil obligations which are defined in law and custom and which are external to myself and my actions. Even when they conform to my own sentiments and when I feel their reality within me, that reality does not cease to be objective, for it is not I who have prescribed these duties; I have received them through education. Moreover, how often does it

A typical social fact, for example, is language, which despite being used by individuals exists independently of them and is therefore supra-individual. Accordingly, to live in a certain social environment and communicate with it, people must obey the norms of language.

Durkheim maintained that sociology should be constructed through methods analogous to those of the natural sciences while rejecting the idea that non-social facts could explain social phenomena. Defining sociology as a science of social facts, he drew the following methodological conclusions:

1. Social phenomena cannot be explained by phenomena of other kinds, especially biological or psychological explanations [Ibid.: 125 ff.]; the explanation of social life must be sought in the nature of society itself.

2. Social facts must be examined as objects (i.e. from the outside), as external to and independent of human individuals. [6] One must approach them not introspectively but empirically – as in the natural sciences – as something of which we have no a priori knowledge.

3. According to Durkheim, the basic empirical material of sociology could not be biographies, diaries, letters, or individual statements, as they contained not just individual views of reality, but also legal codes, ethical standards, religious dogmas and political programs; on the contrary, they expressed the facts of collective consciousness and coercion.

Durkheim is among the recognized classic thinkers of sociology whose influence has been multifaceted and long-lasting; he not only created an

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happen that we are ignorant of the details of the obligations that we must assume, and that, to know them, we must consult the legal code and its authorised interprets! Similarly, the believer has discovered from birth, ready fashioned, the beliefs and practices of his religious life; if they existed before he did, it follows that they exist outside of him. The system of signs that I employ to express my thoughts, the monetary system I use to pay my debts, the credit instruments I utilise in my commercial relationship, the practices I follow in my profession, etc., all function independently of the use I make of them." [Durkheim 1982 (1895): 50-51]

[6] In addition, it may be observed that the positivist sociology characteristic in this statement corresponds to what is generally referred to as quantitative methodology. Qualitative methodology, on the other hand, is based on the assumptions of Weberian "understanding" (interpretive) sociology.

original sociological conception but succeeded in applying it to empirical data (see his work on suicide [1952 (1897)] and on religion [2002 (1912)]). For this reason, Durkheim cannot be overlooked or ignored even in contemporary considerations of sociological theory. On the other hand, there is no point attempting to conceal the fact that for today's generation of sociologists he is a figure of the past, a historical figure of "classical" sociology, whose ideas are good to know, but with which few can fully identify.

Yet Durkheim's ideas continue to speak to us, and quite intensely. This is primarily because he influenced and inspired dozens, or rather hundreds, of followers and successors. Bearing the essential stamp of Durkheim's influence, for instance, is French structuralism, as manifested and developed not only in sociology, but above all in structural anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss) and to a degree also in historical sciences (Fernand Braudel), post-structuralism (Foucault) and later postmodernism (Michel Maffesoli). Beyond France, the influence of Durkheimian thought can be found in functionalism, structural functionalism, neofunctionalism and systems theory (Talcott Parsons, Robert K. Merton, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Niklas Luhmann). However, certain Durkheimian impulses can also be traced in constructivism (Peter Berger – Thomas Luckmann) or in interactionism (inspiration for Erving Goffman and Randall Collins proceeded, for example, from Durkheim's concept of ritual). The imaginary baton of Durkheimian thought has been passed on to today's generation of sociologists primarily by Pierre Bourdieu, whose conception of structuralist constructivism can be seen as a transformed and sophisticated version of Durkheim's collectivism.

2.2 Understanding as a way of explanation

A fundamentally different starting point than Émile Durkheim was presented some years later by Max Weber within the framework of German sociology (1864-1920). While Durkheim based himself on Comte's positivism, Weber's sociology was anti-positivist, bearing – not always clearly identifiable –reflections of the disciplines he studied, i.e. law, economics, history and theology. In Weber's individualistic (atomistic or

nominalistic)[7] approach, the starting point of sociological thinking is the acting individual (later referred to as /individual/ actor) and their action, always with a certain subjective intention.

In general, the individualist standpoint attributes primacy to subjectivity, a sovereign, free individual will exercised in the actions of human individuals. The individualistic perspective brings a view from below of the individual as an actor creating social reality through activities on the basis of understanding and interpretation of the surrounding world, and the significance they ascribe to their actions. Society, social institutions, structures, and systems are built (or constructed) from below through the interconnected actions of individuals; therefore, by interpersonal interaction. The individualist standpoint basically assumes that social phenomena consist of the many different interrelated and interconnected actions of individuals- often complex phenomena which can moreover be retroactively transferred to the actions of individual actors.

While for Durkheim the object of sociology was social facts, for Weber it was a science of social action. Weber presented this orientation first in his study „Über einige Kategorie der verstehenden Soziologie" ("About a category of understanding sociology") published in 1913, where he observed that the subject of sociology was social action and to understand and explain the course of this action through the meaning attributed to it by its actors. [Weber 1988: 432-438] In the later work, „Soziologische Grundbegriffe"[8] ("Basic sociological terms"), Weber characterised sociology as a science of social action to explain causally its course and effects. [Weber 1968 (1921): 4] Sociology should accordingly aim to understand social action by understanding and interpreting its meaning (by

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[7] The term nominalism has its origin in medieval scholastics and is used in opposition to the term realism. As applied to sociological thought, the term realism expresses the assumption that the entities referred to by such aggregate terms as social class, organization, society, or public opinion really exist. Nominalism, on the other hand, takes such terms to be mere names that denote certain intellectual constructions, but not something of independent real existence. According to nominalists, only individual actions really exist. In sociological thought, the nominalist position is historically associated with Weber, the realist with Durkheim.
[8] This work was published as the first chapter of Weber's book, entitled *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Economy and Society)*, published after Weber's death († 1920).

capturing and interpreting its sense). Key to this is the German word *Verstehen* – understanding or comprehension – from which Weber's sociology derives its designation as *die verstehende Soziologie* – 'understanding sociology'.[9]

 The subject of Weberian sociology is not just any action, but social action, which means action oriented towards others. Weber differentiates the concepts of behaviour, action, and social action. Behaviour is usually defined as the reaction (or set of reactions) of an organism to stimuli from its environment or within itself. Weber defined the concept of action precisely in relation to the concept of behaviour, saying that action means "human behaviour (whether overt, covert, of omission or passive acceptance) in so far as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it." [Ibid.: 4]

If subjective meaning is missing in the actions of individuals, we cannot speak of action, but only of "reactive behaviour". Action, in short, is meaningful doing.

Weber understood social action as action whose objective (intended by one or more acting persons) relates to the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course. [Ibid.: 4]

In this context, Weber pointed out that "not every type of action – not even outwardly ongoing (overt) action – is a 'social' act". Outwardly oriented action is not social action if solely oriented to the expected reaction of material objects and not to other individuals.

The meaning of an action is always subjective; what matters is its motive, understood as a certain sensory connection with what appears to be its cause. Regarding motive, he distinguished four ideal types of social action: purposeful-rational (goal-rational, instrumental), value-rational, traditional and affective. [Ibid.: 24-25][10] The rationality of purposively rational action

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[9] With his concept of understanding sociology, Weber followed the German spiritual tradition (represented by names such as Dilthey, Windelband and Rickert), but at the same time attempted to overcome it.
[10] Let us add that in the study „Über einige Kategorie der verstehenden Soziologie", from 1913. Weber distinguished – with respect to the social formations thus constituted

is given by the purpose, or goal, to which it is directed.[11] A value-rational action is guided by the value being pursued or the inner conviction of its rightness (regardless of foreseeable consequences).[12] Traditional action is guided by tradition, meaning experienced habits (this type is borderline in what can be considered meaningful action). Affective behaviour is influenced emotionally, by current affects and emotional states (often beyond the limit of what can be considered behaviour). Weber talked about ideal types because specific actions, he saw, were rarely influenced by just one motive, but several were usually manifested simultaneously. Assessing a certain real action, one could consider which of the mentioned ideal types it most closely approximated.

Although Weberian sociology takes individual action as its starting point, it does not stop there but can also examine various complex social phenomena and formations, such as community, society, capitalism, or religion. For Weber's sociology, all social phenomena, formations and in general the entire social order were human creations formed from social relations between acting individuals with their own intentions and orientations; series or complexes of the interconnected actions of individuals. Nevertheless, all these phenomena and formations are understood as manifestations of the actions of specific individuals pursuing goals and values. This distinctly "nominalistic" approach does not exclude Weber from being able to take into account that these supra-individual realities can – as products of human

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– three forms of social action: 1. conjoint action (*Gemeinschaftshandeln*), oriented towards expectations from other persons; 2. societal action (*Gesellschaftshandeln*), in which actors are oriented to certain general rules established in a given unit; 3. consent (*Einverständnis*), based on the understanding of those acting of what is expected of them. [Weber 1988: 452-474]

[11] Purposive rationality is associated with the choice of means from the point of view of the efficiency with which the desired goal can be achieved; therefore, it is associated with the use each means requires. As we will see in utilitarian, economising conceptions, action is generally identified with just this type of purposively rational action.

[12] According to Weber, value rationality [Weber 1968 (1921): 24 ff.) is always irrational from the point of view of purposive rationality, and all the more, the further the value towards which this action is oriented is escalated towards absolute validity.

action –stand in relation to individuals as an external force (see, for example, reflections on the iron cage of rationality)[13].

 Weber characterized the social relations arising between people on this basis with the help of the concept of "opportunity" (die Chance in German) [Ibid.: 27]. This expressed, among other things, that such relations are nothing absolute, manifested with iron necessity, but possess a probabilistic character; if relationships are established, it is likely that the actions within them will be expected – that is, aligned with each other with a certain meaning – and have a characteristic, steady course. From the nominalist position, Weber rejected the understanding of such concepts as state, church, marriage, etc. as "substantial"; therefore, among other things, he stated that when the possibility of certain social actions disappeared, the respective social formation ceased to exist sociologically.

Weberian individualism – like Durkheimian holism – has had its followers. To this day two distinct approaches may be recognised as based on it. Of tighter and internally less differentiated character are the stream of utilitarian conceptions represented by methodological individualism, exchange theory and rational choice theory (Coleman, Boudon, Esser). More varied, more differentiated and at the same time also somewhat more influential today is the second stream, interpretive sociology, represented by phenomenological sociology (Schutz), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel), constructivism (Berger and Luckmann) and symbolic interactionism, associated with the American pragmatist tradition.

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From their beginnings to the present day Durkheimian holism and Weberian individualism represent opposing approaches to theoretical thinking. Both encounter certain problems, limitations and restrictions during development; both are subject to the danger of reductionism and simplification. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that during the 20th century a number of research

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[13] The notion of the "iron cage" of rationality came into use through Parsons' translation of Weber's work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber himself used the German expression *stahlhartes Gehäuse – "steel-hard casing"* [Weber 1988: 203], which Parsons translates not quite accurately into English as *iron cage*.

approaches emerged that saw both tendencies as one-sided and limited, and aimed to somehow overcome, bridge, or connect them. The first was Talcott Parsons, who in *The Structure of Social Action* tried to interconnect the ideas of Weber and Durkheim [Parsons 1966a (1937)]. Later there were Norbert Elias [1970]; Pierre Bourdieu [1998]; Roy Bhaskar [1978]; Margaret Archer [1995]; Bruno Latour [2005], Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot [2007], and many others. Among the most ambitious attempts in this direction was that of Anthony Giddens, whose approach we will now examine.

2.3 New Rules

 Early in his career, Anthony Giddens (born 1938) associated his theoretical work with efforts to reconstruct social theory. Part of this was a critique of the then-dominant structural functionalism, where functionalist explanatory models combined with a positivist philosophy of science had been promoted after the Second World War. Guided by his quest for a conception as a theoretical and methodological starting point for research not only in sociology, but in the entire field of social sciences, Giddens gradually arrived at the theory of structuration, referring to it as social (not sociological), since it could thus be applicable to all social sciences. Sociology itself was understood in this context not as the study of societies as a whole, but specifically as a science focussed on modern societies. [Giddens 1984: 17-18]

In light of *The Rules of Sociological Method* [Durkheim 1982 (1895)] we can understand Giddens' rejection of Parsons' structural functionalism as to a large extent a criticism of Durkheim's sociological legacy. According to Giddens, structural functionalism and French structuralism shared some common features, inspired by Durkheim. However, the fundamental difference between structuralism and functionalism was that functionalism drew inspiration from the field of biology as a parallel to a biological system; by contrast, structuralism was based on linguistics and tried to apply linguistic models to social and cultural phenomena. [Giddens 1979: 9] As for criticism of social scientific positivism, this was linked to Giddens' inclination towards interpretive sociology, where the tradition of Weberian "understanding" sociology was largely preserved and developed. The core of Giddens's attempt to reconstruct social theory was the question of the

relationship between action and structure, with Giddens' "theory of structuration" as a proposed solution.

The theory of structuration gradually crystallized over the 1970s and early 1980s in Giddens's work. The first significant contribution was *New Rules of Sociological Method* [1976], where Giddens replaced Durkheim's "Positivist Manifesto" from 1895 with a set of rules for the "post-positivist" (or rather "anti-positivist") scientific program. In retrospect, many readers may receive the impression that Giddens started to create this quasi-manifesto at a point when not everything was thought out in detail. Therefore, some ideas in this work appear as unelaborated hints. Giddens' approach took more concrete form in *Central Problems in Social Theory* [1979] and reached a certain degree of codification in *The Constitution of Society* [1984]. Only through reading these two books are Giddens' conception better understood and justified.

Giddens found the starting point for his reflections in polemic against a trend that had dominated American sociological theoretical thinking from the early 1950s to the early 1970s (represented by T. Parsons, R. K. Merton and S. M. Lipset) labelled the "orthodox consensus". According to Giddens, this consensus represented [1981: 88] naturalism from the philosophical point of view and functionalism from the methodological one.

Giddens defined functionalism as holding that society has needs and functional necessities [Ibid.: 92] which are attributes of its social system; identifying how it copes with these needs and demands explains why particular social processes are as they are, and thus provides the key to comprehending the whole system.[14] Giddens argued that social systems do not have needs, at least not as individual actors have. Accordingly [Ibid.: 90], the social system could not be adequately described and explained by a functionalist approach, mainly because in emphasizing systemic needs

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[14] Although Giddens considered functionalism – inspired by the work of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski – out of fashion, and outdated, so to speak, he admitted that the problems brought to sociology by the functionalists could simply be forgotten. According to Giddens, functionalism is stronger than phenomenological sociology in the analysis of institutions and a wide range of social processes.

functionalist authors fail to see human beings as rational, reasoning actors substantially aware of their actions.

Giddens considers among the foremost tasks of social theory to solve the question of human actors, their consciousness, their actions, the structural conditions of these action, and their consequences, in a reconstructed social theory [Ibid.: 91]. Although the concept of action appears under the influence of Max Weber even in Parsons' conception, Giddens deems this structural functionalist interpretation inadequate. He criticizes Parsons' view of human actors as those whose actions produce and reproduce social institutions or social structures, while the entire social system is unaffected. In this sense, Giddens contrasts Parsons with Erving Goffman, with the conception of acting human beings as skilled and knowledgeable agents who use–within a certain routine–knowledge for the production and reproduction of social bonds. Parsons' attempt to combine a "voluntarist" theory of action (representing individual freedom) and a structural-functional theory (representing the social order) Giddens' considers unsuccessful. On the contrary, he judges that there remains an unbridgeable gap between agency and structure.

Giddens understands action as rationally explicable doing that is reflexively organized by people. Giddens' conception of action – using the terms action and agency as synonyms – may seem odd to the traditional theory of action. *Agency refers to doing* [Giddens 1984: 10], entailing involvement in the continuous stream of events in the social world, not reactively, but as a conscious and reflexively controlled action of actors. Giddens does not examine action as a discrete creative act, but as time-ordered and spatially localized recursive practices able to intervene in social events.

The picture Giddens creates of members of society may recall symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. Giddens' humans are self-aware, gifted with the ability to understand what they do while doing it. [Ibid.: 5-14] They possess reflexivity and self-reflexivity. The knowledge or familiarity with which people carry out relevant social practices is a condition for action, but also a consequence (or product) of it.

Citing Goffman and Garfinkel, Giddens points out that in today's complex
societies individuals could not survive without the ability to routinise the
everyday. Most actions are therefore characterised by repetition, among the
prerequisites for trust in the permanence of the social environment and
feelings of ontological security. The relevance of routinisation is clearly
illustrated when established forms of everyday life are undermined or
shaken. [Ibid.: 60 ff.]

Giddens' concept of agency presumes a competent, conscious actor, linked
to *knowledgeability* and *capability*. According to Giddens, one must
distinguish levels of motivation for action; in this context, he introduces the
stratified model of three layers of consciousness: discursive, practical
(rooted in social *praxis* and dominant in everyday dealings) and the
unconscious.

The concept of *knowledgeability* relates to practical knowledge, reflection,
stock of knowledge, and the experience of individual actors. For action to
be a continuous flow, it must constantly be reflexively monitored.
According to Giddens, actors usually know what they are doing and may if
called on provide competent information about their actions. Accordingly,
all competent members of society are skilled in the practical implementation
of social activities, and as such, "sociological experts" whose knowledge is
incorporated into the social reality they create.

Capability, or the ability of actors to act, Giddens associates with the
concept of power [Ibid.: 14-16] (whoever acts automatically has a certain
power). Giddens stresses the importance of power for achieving objectives,
and therefore the actions of every person express the ability to change the
social and material world. Power, defined as relations of autonomy and
dependence between actors where the structural properties of domination
are created and reproduced, is an integral element of social life.

Giddens [1976: 93-95] rejects Durkheimian positivism's attempts to explain
how societies function without the motives and intentions of individuals. He
instead stresses the importance of interpretive sociology, pointing to
linguistic mediation and reflexivity. Inspired by interpretive sociology, this
emphasizes the importance of understanding and replaces positivist

approaches with the idea of the *double hermeneutic* [Giddens 1976: 162; 1984: 284, 374], understood as the intersection of two meaning frameworks, the first representing a meaningful social world constituted by lay actors, the second shaped by the concepts created by social scientists; the practice of social sciences meanwhile is built on constant slippage from one frame to the other. [Petrusek 1990: 383]

Giddens considers one the fundamental problems of sociology to be order, conceived as the organization of society in time and space [Giddens 1984b]. A social system represents an arrangement of social relations in time and space, constantly shaped, reproduced and changed by the social practices of actors. To properly understand Giddens' approach, one important aspect must be added: his conviction that spatio-temporal relations should be at the centre of social theory in a way previously absent. Giddens opposed functionalism because it represented a remnant of the false distinction between statics and dynamics, or synchronicity and diachronicity, which should be abandoned once and for all. This was the error that time plays no role in a synchronic perspective focused on the sources of social stability, and any importance it held was only in diachronic analysis linked and identified with social change. [Giddens 1981: 91] Such a position was wrong, Giddens judged, because time is relevant not only when examining change but in examining social structure and the stability of a social system (stability meaning continuity over time).

The core of Giddens' approach, however, lay in structuration theory, whose underlying axiom is the claim that the original dualism of subjectivist and objectivist social theories must be overcome. The basic framework for this is the theorem of duality of structure.[15]

Traditional sociological dualism, suggesting sharp opposition between action and structure, should be replaced by the principle of duality.[16]

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[15] Giddens' theory replaces the dualism of the individual and society with the duality of agency and structure [Giddens 1984: 25 ff.] or by the duality of structure.

[16] It can also be expressed that structuration theory attempts to merge the objectivist point of view with the subjectivist point of view and thus overcome their one-sidedness. In addition, Giddens believed that with this approach he could overcome not only the traditional dualism of action and structure, but also the dualism of micro and macro theory. Structuration theory programmatically rejects the traditional

Giddens' strategy, converting dualism into constitutive *duality*, lay in the mutual approaching of both poles. [Müller 1992: 168] Structure in this sense is not the opposite of action, but another dimension of it. Action and structure must be seen as interrelated.

In structuration theory, structures emerge due to social action but are also a means of social action. "According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize." [Giddens 1984: 25; Giddens 1981: 92] The concepts structure and action denote analytically distinct moments of structured reality. Structures themselves do not exist at all as separate phenomena of a spatial and temporal nature but only in the form of the actions and practices of human individuals. Actors incorporate structures into their actions, and structures lend certainty and continuity to these actions. On the one hand, structure constrains action, but on the other hand it enables it. Without structures, we would be constantly disoriented and therefore clueless in managing our everyday life. However, structures set limits to our actions.

Structures exist not "outside of action but are chronically implicated in this production and reproduction." [Giddens 1984: 374] They consist of the *rules and resources*[17] which actors rely on in their actions, but at the same time (as rules and resources) are reconstituted through individual actions and the interpersonal interactions they create. If individuals stopped acting,

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distinction between the terms "micro-" and "macro-''sociology as confusing and misleading, because neither level can be preferred, and moreover this distinction leads to a certain contradiction, in which microsociology sees action primarily as an expression of human free will, while macrosociology, on the other hand, mainly reflects the structural pressures that define the boundaries of human action.

[17] If, in Giddens' concept, the social system represents such an arrangement of social relations in time and space as is shaped and reproduced by the social practices of individual and collective actors, then the term structure refers to a set of rules and resources that can be viewed in virtual terms as properties of a social system. Structures are created mainly by two kinds of rules: constitutive rules (explaining the nature of the phenomenon and defining it) and regulatory rules (establishing relationships between phenomena) [Giddens 1984: 19 ff.] and two basic types of sources: authoritative (ensuring the obedience of human subjects) and allocative (relating to the non-human domain). [Giddens 1979: 92-94] The essential point is that all types of resources establish power and are unevenly distributed in society.

the structures maintained and reproduced by them would also cease to exist. To analyse the structuring of social systems means, according to Giddens, to examine the ways these systems and their structures are produced and reproduced in the interaction of actors reliant in their actions on already existing system structures.

2.4 What Next?

In today's sociological literature, one hardly encounters programmatic writing such as that presented to the professional public by Émile Durkheim, or (eight decades later) by Anthony Giddens. The situation in sociological theory today may remind us of the time prior to the advent of postmodernism in art. After creating ever new artistic directions, development seemed to have stagnated and everything possible seemed to have been tried, so the emergence of a fundamentally new artistic style could hardly be expected.

Today's situation in sociology echoes this. While it cannot be argued that development has completely stopped, in the last decade or so it has resembled the transformations of fashion: there are always novelties that are capable of generating momentarily wider interest and response, but over time they withdraw from the scene to make room for another just as ephemeral topic or orientation.

In terms of attractiveness and appeal compared to the first four post-war decades- the area of general sociological theory has lost significantly; as if all that remained was to decide what was to be done with the range on display– like some supermarket of sociological ideas. This general embarrassment is reinforced by the fact that the few who lean towards sociological theory often understand and use it for the promotion of political ideologies, programs and positions.

Today- half a century after Giddens- the idea that someone could come up with "New Rules of Sociological Method", can hardly be considered, which is why this book has bet (as mentioned in the introduction) on the terms "critical eclecticism" and "reconfigurationism". The following chapters- in the spirit of these research strategies- attempt to get us absorbed in the