

Rethinking the Theoretical Concepts of Sociology

Rethinking the Theoretical Concepts of Sociology:

*Critical Eclecticism and
Reconfigurationism*

By

Jiří Šubrt

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Chapter 1	1
How to deal with the intellectual heritage of previous generations	
1.1. Critical eclecticism and reconfigurationism as a way	2
1.2. Multiple theories	5
1.3. Sociology as a science of social processes.....	10
Chapter 2	17
About one sociological dilemma	
2.1. Society or individuals	17
2.2. Individual as a Homo duplex	27
2.3. What a duplex perspective can show	32
Chapter 3	42
Theory of action - continuity and discontinuity	
3.1. Sociology as a science of social action	42
3.2. Action and different social levels.....	46
3.3. Actor and action.....	50
3.4. Forming of social reality	57
3.5. Some ambiguities.....	62
Chapter 4	69
Institutions – how to work with this concept	
4.1. Conceptual clarification	69
4.2. Three theoretical approaches to the explanation of the establishment of institutions.....	72
4.3. Weaknesses of contemporary approaches.....	77
Chapter 5	84
Social role - a topic that is forgotten today	
5.1. The starting point is the institutions	84
5.2. Different conceptions and approaches to the issue of social roles	90
5.3. Role performer or actor?	103
5.4. Action and social role	108

Chapter 6	117
The actor and social reality	
6.1. Social construction of reality – a brief reminder.....	118
6.2. The social construction of reality – a critical discussion.....	120
6.3. Possible approaches to the individual actor in the perspective of sociological thinking.....	127
Chapter 7	134
Social structures and their diversity	
7.1. Different theoretical approaches, different types of structures ..	135
7.2. Structure and function.....	138
7.3. Habitus and field	139
7.4. Structures and structuration	141
7.5. Dimensions of structuration	144
Chapter 8	150
Social processes – the starting point and also the goal	
8.1. Theoretical thinking between extensivity and reductionism.....	151
8.2. Statics, dynamics and time.....	155
8.3. Stability, change, continuity and discontinuity	158
8.4. Supra-individual social mechanisms.....	161
8.5. Personality of the actor in social processes.....	164
8.6. What does the perspective of social processes offer?	166
Bibliography	171

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I have been attracted to the issue of sociological theory since my student days, i.e., approximately forty years; for more than two decades, I participated in its teaching in the form of specialized lectures and seminars within the framework of bachelor's, master's and doctoral study programs at Charles University in Prague. During this time, I continually familiarized myself with the issue not only by following professional literature, but also through contacts and discussions with leading sociologists from many countries of the world, especially from Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, the United States, France and Italy. Thanks to these stimuli and inspirations, I formed, but also gradually transformed, my opinions on the entire field of sociological theory. My initial ideas of the contemporary theoretical scene, as a conglomerate of diverse opinions practically impossible to connect and reconcile with each other, were overturned by researching the causes of this conceptual labyrinth, and then by trying to somehow encompass this diversity. The path that I consider to be promising in this respect is not the creation of some new sociological paradigm, but what is referred to in this work as critical eclecticism and reconfigurationism. There have been many personalities encouraging to me in my efforts, but a special thanks in this place above all belongs to the dozens of inquisitive students whom I have lectured over many years and who are my main stimulating force. A special thanks too goes to my long-term language advisor Edward Everett.

Jiří Šubrt

CHAPTER 1

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE OF PREVIOUS GENERATIONS

Sociology is a relatively young science – barely 200 years old. A look at its history shows that much of what originated in the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century has been forgotten, and only historians of sociology sometimes recall certain topics and personalities of this period. However, others remain authorities to this day, especially the “holy trinity”: Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Leaving aside Marxism, which represents a direction with a specific orientation, distinctive development, successors and followers, we can observe that the mainstream of sociological thinking is to this day influenced by the basic thought laid down by Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. Their tradition is so sacred for today’s sociologists that even after a hundred years, hardly anybody dares to question even one of the opinions these founding fathers proclaimed in their time. It should be said, however, that this tradition is also worked on somewhat selectively, as what is usually highlighted is what can be followed up in some way, while the rest is not much talked about. Despite this selective approach, there may be a – probably largely justified impression that contemporary sociology is still in some sort of captivity to the late 19th century and early 20th century. However, it is not only direct connections to the mentioned classical authors, but also an overall style of sociological thinking which the contemporary sociology cannot break away from or surpass. Undoubtedly, part of the reason for this is a silent assumption that these classics have presented us with a kind of meta-theoretical foundation for the field which no longer needs to be fundamentally examined, let alone problematized or questioned.

1.1. Critical eclecticism and reconfigurationism as a way

One of the few to question the problematic assumptions of the traditional meta-theoretical foundations of sociology is Bruno Latour [2005: 3 ff.], who combines his critique of the so-called “social” concept as a kind of specific phenomenon with what is called “sociology of the social”. “The social” (whether associated with the Durkheimian concept of social facts or Weberian social action) according to Latour, is understood in the concepts of the “founding fathers” as something that differs from other domains such as geography, politics, law, psychology, etc. Latour considers this approach based on a reduction of “the social”, because it is unable to adequately capture the pragmatic aspects from which the individual actors approach their actions, or the heterogeneous nature of the phenomena or facts that sociology supposedly studies.

From another perspective, we can see the reductionist element in contemporary sociology in the way it often absolutizes language, speech and speech acts. Processes of an economic or power-based nature are often perceived as something not fully relevant to sociological theory, and this is perhaps partly because speech communication is used universally in all areas of human life, including economics and politics.

It is often said that sociology is a multi-paradigmatic science. There have been various ideas in the past, and still today, about its proper foundations. These differences emerge from certain contradictions and theoretical dilemmas that divide sociological thinking into opposing camps. There are a number of such camps. Among the most important are conceptual opposites: consensus and conflict, individualism and holism, micro- and macro-perspectives, positivism and anti-positivism, and quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Consensus and conflict symbolize opposition, connected with one of the fundamental sociological problems, the question of how orderliness, which we call ‘social order’, emerges in society, and how it is maintained. Representatives of the consensual approach argue that social order is the result of consensual factors and influences. These are considered to be a) shared religious beliefs or ideological persuasions, and the resulting systems

of values and norms (value consensus), and b) cooperation on division of labour (people must work together to survive). The opposite, conflictualist view, works from the assumption that the social order grows out of conflict and struggle, and is maintained by violent power and its means (people ordered by force).

The opposition of individualism and holism arises from different ideas about the starting point of sociological thinking and research. Individualist approaches deem that the starting point should be the human individual and its thinking, motivation, behaviour or action. Holistic sociological directions presume that one must start from society as a whole, above individual social reality, from human collectives and supra-individual social facts.

Micro- and macro-perspectives focus on different levels of social reality. Micro sociological approaches are founded on the issue of individual action and social interactions between individuals, usually within small social groups. Macrosociological approaches seek to capture and examine social units, societal systems and subsystems, supranational units, cultures or civilizations.

The contradiction between positivism and anti-positivism is related to the question of the nature of social reality, and whether it is similar to the natural reality examined by the natural sciences. Positivist sociology starts from the assumption that there is similarity and agreement between social reality and natural reality, and sociology must therefore take the more advanced natural sciences as a model in the development of theory and research methods. Anti-positivist sociology, on the other hand, argues that natural reality and social reality are fundamentally different because social reality is shaped by human activity, consciousness, language, and material and intangible culture, which are not present in the original natural environment. For that reason, the theory and method of sociology should evolve differently from the natural sciences.

The opposition of positivism and anti-positivism is reflected in the methodological contradictions between quantitative and qualitative research methods. Representatives of positivist-oriented sociology tend to view social facts as “things” and use quantitative methodology based on the

application of statistical and mathematical approaches. Representatives of anti-positivist sociology, on the contrary, direct their attention to depicting and analysing the meaning people associate with their action, thereby using qualitative methodology.

The state of contemporary sociology, with its paradigmatic diversification and disintegration, can resemble a kind of supermarket in which we are offered various theoretical conceptions, selected according to taste and preference. Some sociologists consider this advantageous, while for others it represents a problem that could, and probably should, be overcome.

Among the means suggested for this is the development of a new theory with a significance that surpasses and overshadows previous ones. However, this seems quite unrealistic based on previous experience, because no theory emerging during the relatively short history of sociological thinking has ever succeeded in dominating the field of sociological thinking.

Another plausible approach could be a critical assessment of individual paradigms, not only to point out their strengths and weaknesses, but also to indicate how individual specific conceptions could be drawn into and incorporated – as partial theoretical perspectives – into the generalised internally interconnected corpus of sociological knowledge.

An approach that could lead to such a goal can be described as “critical eclecticism”. However, this arrangement of theoretical thinking cannot be understood as a mere effort to connect all – often quite diverse – theoretical elements in a collage-like way. This effort must be accompanied by an endeavour to give shape to this systematically arranged conceptual system. Therefore, it must be complemented by what can be described as “critical reconfigurationism”. However, this assumes that we can organize the perspectives and tendencies that have led to the fragmentation of the sociological thinking in such a way as to enable their mutual integration. What such an attempt requires at the same time is the adoption of a relatively new framework to allow this. Such a framework may be a conception that understands sociology as a science of social processes. We will try outline the basics of such an approach in the chapters which follow.

1.2. Multiple theories

In this book, we deal with sociological theory, and thus we will now focus on the question of how theory can be approached within sociology. A theory, in general, is a set of ideas and opinions aimed at explaining a particular phenomenon or set of phenomena. It consists of a system of statements presenting such an explanation, corresponding to the degree of knowledge achieved at the time (it does not contradict it), which is therefore considered adequate or true. The system of statements that make up a theory is usually compiled in the form of a coherent and internally consistent interpretation, aimed at scientific knowledge in terms of scientific method, formulation of research questions or hypothesis.

The important thing is that a theory is not a direct, immediate description of real phenomena, but an attempt at the identification and interpretation of their essential features, with an idealized abstract nature. Because all scientific research is necessarily selective (it can never consider all the aspects of reality), and nor can any theory capture the phenomena under study in all their complexity, it must reduce complexity in some way and abstract from various aspects of known reality. After all, individual phenomena often have many properties of unequal importance for individual scientific disciplines.

In *Modern Sociological Theory* Malcolm Waters [1994] provides a list of criteria to be met by a sociological theory. According to Waters, it must be:

1. abstract, i.e. using general terms to abstract from the social life;
2. *thematized*, thematically unified;
3. logically consistent (indisputable);
4. *explanatory*, it must contain an explanation of the form, nature or existence of social phenomena;
5. general, applicable to all cases of the given phenomenon;
6. independent, that is, providing an explanation independent of how social actors themselves explain their actions;
7. substantively valid- consistent with what is known about social life both among lay actors and sociologists [Waters 1994: 3].

Jeffrey C. Alexander [1987b] in *Sociological Theory Since 1945* claims that in science we must distinguish between “general” and “special” theory. In sociology there are many special theories, such as stratification, socialization, politics, and administration, and these are a matter of more or less specialized disciplines [ibid.: 3]. Alexander considers one of the essential tasks of a general theory to be the interconnection of individual special theories into a consistent whole.

It should be added that the form of a general sociological theory depends to a large extent on how sociology is understood and defined. And here we find that in its history the discipline has been defined in very different ways. Therefore, it is also difficult – if not impossible – to arrive at a definition of sociology acceptable to all who deal with it.

For one example, we can recall the older approach formulated by Polish author Jan Szczepański [1966], who characterized sociology as a science seeking to know the laws of the structure and development of society. This definition is so general that it might seem to raise no major objections. But it still provokes them. Let us recall that this definition corresponds to the original program given to sociology in the 19th century by its founder August Comte [1908a: 283-327, 328-387; 1908b; 1967a; 1967b]. According to Comte, sociology should have two parts, the first was to be social statics (in Szczepański’s terminology ‘structure of society’) and the second social dynamics (in Szczepański’s terminology, ‘development’).¹ Here we encounter two basic problems:

The first is the term “laws”, defined as the view that sociology should reveal scientific laws – acceptable to positivist researchers viewing sociology as similar to the natural sciences; however, this is unacceptable for anti-positivist-oriented researchers, who, on the contrary, believe that sociology should consciously resign from exposing such laws.

¹ In Parsons’ structural functionalism, statics was represented by the analysis of social structures, and the dynamic point was ensured by the concept of function; later, in the second half of the 1960s, Parsons added a dynamic evolutionary perspective to his theoretical framework [Parsons 1966c].

Anthony Giddens points out a second problem [1981: 90 ff.] when he describes the separation of statics and dynamics as false and emphasizes the need to record the points of view of structure and development in a certain unity, which means revealing how structures in social reality reproduce, evolve, and change over time.²

Sociology, as mentioned, has been defined or characterized in various ways throughout its history. For Herbert Spencer [Spencer 1966a: pp. 437-450] it was the science of social organisms. Emile Durkheim [1966 (1895): pp. 1-13] saw it as the study of social facts, supra-individually existing outside individuals and placing them under pressure to which they submit. Max Weber [1978 (1921-1922): pp. 4-28] found its basis in the notion of a social action, which he associated with the meaning with which a certain individual turned to other human beings. For George Simmel [1992 (1908)] it was the science of the forms in which interpersonal relationships take place. After World War II Talcott Parsons [1966c] developed the conception of social systems, their structures and functions. George Caspar Homans [1961], meanwhile, highlighted as a starting point the concept of behaviour. In Marxist circles, the idea of a sociology as a science of socio-economic formations was developed in the late 20th century [Petrusek 1978: pp. 47-52]. Norbert Elias [2012 (1978)] advocated in this context the notion of figuration.

In sociology there have always been and still are numerous theoretical directions and conceptions which interpret sociology in different ways, making it a multi-paradigmatic science.³ However, it can be added that sometimes we also encounter a distinction between general sociology and general sociological theory. In this context, general theory can be attributed primarily to the conceptualization function. Its task is to differentiate,

² The idea of changing structures postulated in Giddens' theory of structuration can also be found – though presented in a different way – also in Luhmann's systems theory, in which the structures of social systems change in the evolutionary development going on based on the principles of variation, selection and stabilization. [Luhmann 1991: 151].

³ Paradigm can be understood in scientific disciplines (in response to T. S. Kuhn [1970]) as their basic component, a kind of core that determines their focus, choice of scientific issues, subject of research, terminology and research methods.

conceptually classify, typologically determine and define the problems that sociology deals with. Simply put, general sociology is a set of basic sociological concepts that students become familiar with in the introduction to sociological courses. These concepts then consist of general sociological theories (theoretical conceptions) whose primary task is to explain how social reality works. The concepts of general sociology are therefore the basic building stones in theory-making. At the same time, there are many such concepts that relate to no particular sociological theory but can be applied across fields in different theoretical frameworks. This opens the possibility for critical eclecticism and reconfiguration advocated in this book. Here we focus especially on concepts which find application in various theoretical frameworks and contexts. These are mainly the concepts of action, structure, system, institution, social role, consensus, conflict, continuity and change.

The word theory is used widely today in scientific as well as everyday language, although we usually have some idea of what it means in a given context. as Calvin Larson [1973] illustrates, in sociology it is variously associated with one, several or all of the following six cases:

1. concepts, conceptual classification and various conceptual constructs;
 2. typology, typological continua and ideal types;
 3. the construction of relations in the form of conceptual schemes;
 4. intelligent hunches in the form of hypotheses, assumptions, theorems and postulates;
 5. propositions, axioms, laws and generalizations;
 6. models, logic-deductive schemes and mathematical formulations
- [Larson 1973: 5].

In Larson's approach, there are obviously mixed cases that can be linked (if we recall Alexander's terminology) both with what is distinguished as a special theory and a general theory. In the section that follows, we focus above all on general theory, where we can find four different approaches to what it means. These can be approached with certain metaphorical characteristics and simple illustrative examples:

1. Theory as a building kit or a jigsaw puzzle.

This type of thinking assumes that we can translate the theoretical picture of reality into a schematic form (we can model it) from certain elements, which we assemble like blocks of Lego. In this model of reality, or a certain part of it, we use concepts instead of building components. We compile these concepts in the form of sentences, or more precisely assertions, that theoretically describe reality. In this way, we arrive at a theoretical description which may contain no theoretical explanation (even though one can be found). An example of this type of theory is Parsons' structural functionalism, or Luhmann's system theory.

2. Theory as the revelation of a certain (usually hidden) mechanism.

In this approach to theory there seems to be something in the background that can be described as a metaphor of a machine. In this case, society – figuratively speaking – is a kind of “megatool”, the individual parts of which comprise certain “mechanisms”, so the theorist sees a role in revealing why and how this machine or certain sub-mechanisms work. It can concern an explanation of phenomena of a singular nature, but also how more phenomena are concatenated and interconnected. Evidence of this reasoning may be found in conceptions to explain social inequalities (Marx, Boudrieu), conflicts (Coser, Huntington), or social change (Weber, Smelser).

3. Theory which diagnoses the state of society or its parts

In this case, we may see the background as an analogy between the society and the human body, while what we are interested in is its physical condition, which, moreover has a case history. In sociology we may encounter, for example, the term “diagnosis of a contemporary society”. In medicine, there is a certain normative idea of health with which the organism or organ is compared. This raises the question of what is beneficial to life and what harms it. Although there has been no similar prevailing idea in the social sciences, simply due to the requirement of value neutrality (first formulated by Max Weber, and later endorsed by many others), there exists a rather pronounced tendency to criticize social phenomena found to be unhealthy, negative, pathological or alienated; see e.g. the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, Honneth).

4. Theory of individual human dispositions

The starting point for this type of social science thinking is the human individual and its potential or disposition to individual action. The individual human ability to assess a given situation, to choose a certain type of action and perform it, becomes the basic principle for explaining what we encounter in social reality. Man is seen as a being able to create unknown things or maintain, and change them. Such theoretical approaches are found in constructivism, and especially in behaviourism (Homans) and the theory of rational action (Coleman).

One problem with theories in sociology is that their creators often strive to link and integrate into a single framework very complicated complexes of social phenomena, while empirically oriented researchers attempt assessment by one type of measurement or a limited set of quantities. Two types of risk then arise: one is the excessive complexity of theoretical models which include very many diverse aspects; the second is reductionism in the complexity of the studied issue, leading to problematic simplifications.

The characteristics of all four above-mentioned approaches are based on emphasising only one of their essential features, so in a sense we could characterize them with a certain exaggeration as types of (Weberian) ideal. In practice, however, these approaches interconnect and combine for the authors of sociological theories in different ways and to differing degrees. We will see this in what follows, on conceptions of the first, second and fourth types, setting aside theories of the third type focused on diagnoses of contemporary society.

1.3. Sociology as a science of social processes

In this book, we recognize the conception of sociology as a science of social processes. There are several reasons for holding this starting point. The first is the assumption that a way should be found to overcome the dualism of individualistic and holistic thinking, among the basic dilemmas of the contemporary social science theory [Šubr 2019].⁴ Although the orientation

⁴ For more details see chapter 2.

of sociology on social processes cannot be described as fundamentally new, nevertheless this approach deserves some comment.

In late-20th century sociology, the concept of process was discussed mainly through attention on Norbert Elias's work *The Civilizing Process* [1994 (1939)], focused on the study of long-term socio-historical processes. This type of process is what historical sociology primarily focuses on today. Elias' research interest was attracted by processes of continuous, long-term change, taking place unintentionally and unplanned. Elias saw their unusualness in the fact that they are bipolar, corresponding to conceptual pairs like integration and disintegration or rise and fall. Another special feature is the ability to remain persistent, with a stability of direction maintained sometimes for centuries, despite the fact that, unlike the biological process of evolution, they can move in reverse. Elias talks about the directions of social processes – regardless of whether “good” or “bad” – and about shifts and breakthroughs from one processual grade to another, accompanied by a transfer of power. Shifts of different types and intensity can take place simultaneously, while changes in one direction can create room for change in the opposite; for example, a predominant integrational process may be countered by partial disintegration, or, on the contrary, a dominant process of disintegration may lead to fresh reintegration.

In discussing these processes late in life, Elias emphasized that while many people believed that mankind was moving along a path of progress, the idea of overall and comprehensive progressive development must be considered a myth. This did not mean that social development could have a certain direction, but that it might not assert itself with unwavering necessity and in all circumstances. In the study of developmental dynamics, one could speak not of necessity but possibilities and probabilities of varying degrees [Elias 1981: 181]. According to Elias, the assertion of long-term development did not mean it would necessarily prevail in the future.

He considered a characteristic of current development – from the Stone Age to the present day – to be the constant clash of civilization processes with decivilizing counter-processes (*entzivilisierende Gegenprozesse*) [Elias 1992: 383]. Civilizing, but also decivilizing, processes have their direction. The direction of the civilizing process represents shifts in the balance of

external and internal regulators of behaviour, in favour of self-control. Decivilization means moving in the opposite direction, characterized, among other things, by a reduction in self-identification and compassion for others. Although decivilization processes have manifested many times, according to Elias, the prevailing tendency had been carried by the civilization process. However, there was no reason to believe that this must be so forever. The warning in this regard related in particular to the mass murder of nations committed by the German Nazis, which refuted the delusion that such barbarism was not possible in the 20th century [Elias – Dunning, 1983a: 33].

Among many representations of sociological thinking there is a common idea that social processes must be understood in precisely the long-term sense that Elias deals with. By contrast, in the conception under consideration here, the problem may lie precisely in such focusing of attention only on historical processes. In our approach, where processes become a starting point of sociological thinking, they are associated with a much broader and more diverse content.

We should recall at this point that the term process is derived from the Latin word *processus*, a form of the verb *procedere*, which means “to advance,” to evolve. Process in this sense therefore denotes a gradual event, or course of events, associated with duration and consecutive and internally interconnected changes of phenomena, or states, things, relationships or systems. Such social phenomena can be associated with individuals, groups, organizations, and other entities (religions, nations, empires, etc.), often in configurations or formations in which more than one such entity is simultaneously involved. These processes have – in terms of systems terminology – certain inputs and outputs, and their course can be characterised by permanence, stagnation, change, competition, conflict, struggle, coexistence, cooperation, etc. In sociology, these events may take place at different levels of social realities, can be played out in different geographical and social boundaries, and are associated with different duration and dynamics of movement.

The social reality which sociology looks at has different layers or levels. Leaving aside Georges Gurvitch [1964] and the 10 social strata of his so-

called deep sociology, we can accept a fairly common distinction between micro- and macro-social levels, between which the mezzo-level is situated. This can be done analogously, depending on duration to talk about short-term, medium-term and long-term processes. If processes relate to units that can be viewed as systems, we can call them systems processes. Niklas Luhmann's sociology speaks of three levels of the constitution of social systems, associated with the concepts of interaction, organization and society. Let us add that many processes are of an inter-system character and run through "system interfaces".

To those willing to accept the idea of long-term processes at the macro-social level, but doubtful whether it is adequate to talk about processes at the micro-social level, it may be pointed out that the term process is common in psychology, where some practitioners view their discipline as a science of "psychic processes." These are played out on a conscious and unconscious level, while a distinction is usually made between cognitive, emotional and volitional processes. They are generally understood as the internal, psychological activity of the human subject, determined in a certain way, arising from the central nervous system, oriented to the external environment, with a certain content, course and consequences.

In sociology, the approach to social processes complicates their multi-level nature to a large extent. If we want to pin down the basic tendencies of what takes place to one of the levels (micro-, mezzo-, or macro-), we usually have to abstract from much of what is happening at other levels. But because the social reality is created in the coordination of the movement taking place at all three levels, at the same time trends revealed at one level can never fully explain what is happening at other levels. Furthermore, some processes may be interrelated, so that an interdependence or synergy manifests itself in their development, an example being the processes of psychogenesis and sociogenesis in Elias' work.

As in psychology, even in sociology it is necessary to ask the question of the composition of the processes studied. An author espousing critical eclecticism and reconfigurationism intends to create not some new conceptual apparatus, but to work with concepts established and common in sociological theory, considering that the components of processes can be

referred to by this terminology. These include, in particular, the “actions” of human beings, which are often part of a longer-term action described as a “social role-playing”. Individual acts and role-playing are involved in a broader context which can be combined with the concepts of “interaction” and “social relations”. These usually take place in certain units, which, together with Elias, we may call “figurations”. Such entities often have certain “institutional structures” at their core and can be considered at micro-, mezzo- and macro-social levels. The lowest level – micro-level – is represented by “interactions” referred to in systems theory as interaction systems, as well as the environment of “small social groups”. Mezzo-level may be “(medium) large social groups” and “organizations”, or organizational systems. At the macro-level, we usually take into account whole “societies” and their parts (in systems theory we talk about societal subsystems; in the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu, social fields), but also supranational and international entities (e.g. military pacts) and cultural or civilization communities (e.g. churches). We may add that these units are situated in different spatio-temporal frameworks and boundaries and often intertwined, with ties which cannot be forgotten in the effort to understand and explain social processes.

An explanation in sociology can try to find certain laws or regularities of the kind considered, for example, in economics. Nevertheless, what can be expected from the social sciences is rather more a revelation of what we can call “tendencies” and “trends,” so that in social reality we encounter relationships and processes that are not usually enforced with “iron necessity”, but rather are associated with what Max Weber called “chance” and Niklas Luhmann termed “contingency”, and thus with a certain – although sometimes very high – degree of probability.

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CHAPTER 2

ABOUT ONE SOCIOLOGICAL DILEMMA

Today's situation in the field of sociological theory is rather complicated and very confusing. This is largely because from its very beginning theoretical thinking in sociology was shaped by opinions arising from different starting points. As a result, certain theoretical dilemmas recur, including in contemporary efforts in sociological theory.

2.1. Society or individuals

Norbert Elias in his book *The Society of Individuals* constantly comes back to a problem characterized as a gap in Western thinking which had opened up between the individual and society and was not easy to bridge [Elias, 2006: 25]. There are two opposing parties of opinion: the proponents of one view claim "Everything depends on the individual," while others believe "Everything depends on society." The former argue that there are always particular individuals who decide what will and will not be done. The latter argue that what individuals do is always socially conditioned [Ibid.: 68].

The antinomies which Elias referred to are associated with various terminological references in current theoretical literature. Jeffrey C. Alexander [1987] distinguishes between individualistic and collectivist theories. Brian Fay in the book, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Sciences*, puts into mutual counter-position the conceptual pair – *atomism* and *holism*.

Individualistic opinion generally attributes primacy to the subjective, sovereign, individual free will applied in the actions of human individuals. The individualistic perspective brings a 'view from below' that sees the individual as an actor who creates social reality with activities based on their understanding and interpretation of world affairs around them, and what meaning or significance they attribute to their actions. Society, social

institutions, structures and systems, are built (or constructed) from below, as a result of the interconnected actions of individuals, and thus are the result of interpersonal interactions.

According to atomism, individuals represent distinct units of social life, with the ability “to control conduct on the basis of beliefs and desires” [Fay 2002: 45]. Atomists understand society as a sum of individuals and consider social units to be attributable to the activities of the individuals who create them. Fay associates atomism with the consideration of the “fundamental singularity of individuals”, thought of “as if... independent of their relations to other people” [Ibid.: 46]. Thomas Hobbes is considered the founder of philosophical atomism; in 20th century social sciences this position had a strong representative in Friedrich von Hayek⁵. In sociology the origins of such methodological individualism are associated with Max Weber [1998].

Atomism is opposed by holism, which Fay characterizes as the doctrine “according to which the characteristics of individuals are exclusively the function of their place in society or in a broad system of meanings” [Ibid.: 67]. According to holism it is always necessary to take social units as the basis for social theory, rather than their individual members. Holism does not admit the possibility of reducing or transferring theories concerning social units to theories about individuals. A key figure of holism is Emile Durkheim but Fay considers structuralism (Levi-Strauss, Foucault, etc.) a more modern version of holism.

Holism is based on the philosophical assumption that the whole is more than the collection of its component parts. Thus, social reality cannot be explained by reference to individuals and their individual actions, but on the basis of its own principles. Émile Durkheim claimed the subjects of sociology to be social facts- supra-individual, external to the individual, and entering consciousness as something external, independent of the will. The

⁵ Fay gives as an example of atomistic opinions a quote from Hayek’s work *Individualism and Economic Order* [1949], which states: there is no other way toward an understanding of social phenomena but through our understanding of individual actions directed toward other people and guided by their expected behaviour” [Fay 2002: 46].

second essential characteristic is that they are endowed with coercive power for the individual to conform to [Durkheim 1926: pp. 36–37, 46].

Durkheim saw society as a reality of a special kind, not the sum of its individual parts, having specific qualities that could not be transferred to individuals. In relation to the individual, it is the social or collective that is determinative. Society has primacy over the individual in that it existed long before the individual and will outlive it. The whole can force individuals to live and act in a certain way. In the holistic perspective individual actions are seen not as a result of the sovereign decision of the individual, but because of social (functional) pressures that society imposes on human individuals.

This opposition that Fay describes can be found in terms of other, interrelated dualisms. Three are mentioned by Derek Layder in *Understanding Social Theory* [Layder 1994: 3]: the dualisms of individual – society, micro – macro, and action – structure. The distinction individual – social, considered the oldest and most persistent dilemma of sociological thought, in principle corresponds with atomism – holism, which Fay addresses. Layder points out that the problem of this dualism is that individuals cannot be put into sharp opposition to society because many of their needs and motivations are created by the social environment. In other words, there is no society without the individuals who define it, and at the same time there are no individuals outside the influence of society [Layder 1994: 3].

Layder's list of three dualisms needs to be complemented by another, which reaches deep into the past, rooted in medieval scholastic philosophy. This is the opposition of nominalism and realism. In application to sociological thinking, the term realism expresses the assumption that entities labelled by aggregated terms, such as social class, organization, society or public opinion, really exist. By contrast, nominalism considers such terms intellectual constructs rather than things of independent real existence. According to nominalists there are only specific individuals and their individual actions. The nominalistic position is traditionally associated with Weber; the realistic one with Durkheim.

James Coleman [1986], who examined the relationship between the social micro-level and macro-levels, observed that the lion's share of social theory and social research – with reference especially to Durkheim and his followers – is solely based on examining relationships on the macrosocial level. He referred to this approach as methodological holism, and contrasted it starkly with methodological individualism, rooted in the theory of action⁶. Coleman considered sociological theory in two respects: the subject of interpretation, and the method of interpretation. In terms of subject, Coleman saw the main task of sociology as the interpretation of social phenomena, not the interpretation of the behaviour of individuals. However, considering method he took a different perspective: as a follower of methodological individualism seeking the explanation of behaviour of social systems based on the analysis of individual behaviour [Coleman 1994: 2 ff.], he believed that explanation at the level of individual action is “more fundamental” and permitted deeper “understanding” than explanation remaining on the level of the system.

Randall Collins gave attention to the long-term relationship between micro- and macro-sociology. He characterized microsociology as a detailed analysis of “what people in the course of their immediate experiencing think, say and do.” By contrast he understands macrosociology as a field of sociology that deals with “extensive and long-term social processes”, often seen as “self-preserving entities”, such as “state”, “organization”, “strata”, “economy”, “culture” or “society” [Collins 1981: 984]. In his book *Theoretical Sociology* Collins [1988] distinguishes macro-theory, micro-theory and meso-theory. Macro-theories include: evolutionism, system theory, political economy (Marxism), conflict theory, social change, and stratification. The concept of human *Self* is attributed to micro-theories, interactionism, social constructivism, structuralism, sociolinguistics and the theory of social exchange. As meso-theories he proposes structuration theory (Giddens), the theory of communicative action (Habermas), network theory and the theory

⁶ Let us add that the conception of methodological individualism corresponds in principle with the opinion that Fay means by the expression atomism; methodological holism corresponds with Fay's characterisation of holism

of organization⁷. In his own theoretical conception, aimed at the development of a micro-sociological perspective, Collins suggested that a sharpened conception of dualism of micro- and macro-structure was de facto misleading because macro-structures can be seen from the micro-sociological perspective as aggregates of micro-situations; in other words. macro-phenomenona can be transposed into into “micro-events” [Collins 1981: pp. 987-990].

The history of 20th century sociology showed that both lines of interpretation – individualistic and holistic- presented viable exploratory strategies found in many specific forms in a series of sociological schools and specializations. Through the individualistic approach we find utilitarian theories, based on the concept of *homo oeconomicus* (exchange theory, rational choice theory), but also interpretive sociology (in particular, phenomenological sociology). From holism meanwhile there was first and foremost structuralism, then functionalism and systems theory. However, alongside this, several exploratory approaches emerged viewing both these tendencies as one-sided and limited, attempting to overcome them by bridging or linking them.

The origins of the first strategy can be traced to Georg Simmel, whose conception of sociology can be seen as reacting to the dispute between sociological nominalism and realism [Keller 2004: 357]. Extreme nominalism is the claim that only human individuals really exist, not society. Realism – on the contrary – not only ascribes objective existence to society and other social wholes, but in addition tends to put society above the individual. Simmel’s definition of sociology attempted to avoid these extremes.

⁷ Concerning which topics or theories should be assigned to each level of sociological research, there is no consensus. This is also supported by the latest attempt to classify theories at the micro, meso and macro level made by the book *Contemporary Sociological Theory: An Integrated Multi-Level Approach*, whose author is Doyle Paul Johnson [2008]. Johnson’s classification is in many ways different from Collins’ approach. He connects the micro level with problems of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, social exchange and rational choice; the meso level with theories of communities, organizations, market and socio-economic classes, and macro theory with those of social order, structural functionalism, neofunctionalism, conflict and critical theory. In addition, Johnson still speaks of multi-level approaches, which include feminist theory, structuration theory, sociobiology, cultural sociology and postmodernism.

Simmel stood apart from nominalism, emphasizing the primacy of sociability over individuality, and moreover admitted that interactions between individuals result in specific social qualities that are not original to the acting persons. However, at the same time he distanced himself from realism, from the substantialist conception of social reality, and emphasized its processual character. Society, according to Simmel, existed not as a substance, but as interaction between individuals [Simmel 1970: 27]. Simmel believed that society exists only because it is moment by moment re-created by the interaction of people and their mutual interaction, in which various forms of interpersonal association are lastingly formed, reproduced, but also annulled. Simmel highlighted this as the third, most important social phenomenon, and referred to it as *Wechselwirkung*.

In contemporary sociological theory issues concerning the relationship between micro-and macro-level, between the subjective and objective, are often associated with another dualism, that of behaviour and structure. For many contemporary social theorists these are the conceptual basis of social theory. Negotiation and structure are often characterized as the “subjective” and “objective” aspects of social reality. The subjective aspect is associated with individuals, their qualities and individual behaviour; the objective side is associated with the existence of social structures which are relatively independent of the actions of individual actors. Anthony King adds: “negotiations refer to activities (... which) usually indicates the actions of individuals or groups of individuals”. Structures on the other hand “refer to regular, relatively fixed, objective and generalized features of social life”; the term usually “refers to social institutions or ‘systems’, ‘forces’ or ‘currents’” [King, 2006: 291]. Perhaps the most famous attempt to overcome this dualism of action and structure, and other dilemmas, is Giddens’ theory of structuration, and parallel to it the related social realism of Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer.

Anthony Giddens, like Parsons before him, sought to lay down the theoretical foundations of the social sciences. Parsons’ attempt, based on the link between the “voluntaristic” theory of action (representing individual liberty) and structural functionalism (representing the social order), Giddens considered unsuccessful. On the contrary, he maintained that there remained an unbridged gap between action and structure.