

## POSTSTRUCTURAL THEORIES

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### Summary

This chapter does not cover in any systematic and/or exhaustive manner the numerous theoretical paradigms in post-war social theory. Instead, there is a brief overview of those developments in theory which focus on features (such as the action/structure and macro/micro distinctions) which are related to the major concern of the building of bridges between modern and late-modern approaches to the study of social phenomena.

This chapter presents an overview of those postwar theoretical developments that are relevant to issues of the theoretical agenda of sociology. In dealing with Parsons's theoretical synthesis and the numerous reactions to it, the focus is on the way agency and structure/system are conceptualized. Starting from a critique Starting from a

critique of Parsons's systematic overemphasis in his middle and late work the chapter briefly examines the reaffirmation by interpretative sociologists of the agentic qualities of laypersons as well as the linguistically and culturally informed attempts to decenter the subject via a focus on hidden codes, subjectless practices and texts/narratives. Two major attempts at a post-Parsonsian synthesis are referred to critically: those by Giddens and Bourdieu. These two theorists have tried to transcend the subjectivist-objectivist, actor-structure divide in the social sciences, a divide which has pitted interpretatively orientated sociologies (like those of symbolic interactions, phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology) against more objective approaches (structural-functionalism, structuralism and post-structuralism).

## 1. Introduction

The development of the social sciences in general and of sociology in particular is inextricably linked with the emergence and consolidation of the nation-state in nineteenth-century Europe. The nation-state and the more general modern social organization it entails have two basic dimensions that distinguish it from all pre-modern social formations:

- (i) The decline of segmental localism and the massive mobilization/ inclusion of the population in the national centre. This 'bringing in' process entails the concentration of the means of not only economic but also political, social and cultural production at the top; as well as the shifting of attachments and orientations from the traditional, non-differentiated community to what Anderson has called the 'imaginary community' of the nation-state;
- (ii) The top to bottom differentiation of the societal whole into distinct institutional spheres, each portraying its own logic, values and historical dynamic. This differentiation, unlike that of complex, pre-modern social formations, is not confined to the top but reaches the social base or periphery as well.

Classical sociologists have tried to understand the social realities resulting from the British Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution by focusing holistically on the above two major features of modernity. Spencer and Durkheim, for instance, explored differentiation as a major feature of the evolutionary process leading to the emergence of modern societies. Marx and Weber, without neglecting differentiation, emphasized more how the centralizing, bureaucratizing aspects of the bringing-in process led to an unprecedented concentration of the means of production and domination at the top.

Marxist political economy is the discipline's holistic framework par excellence. More than any other paradigm it raises questions about the constitution, reproduction and transformation of whole social formations, particularly capitalist ones. One of its major features is striking a balance between a systemic/'externalist' and an actor/'internalist' perspective. As Lockwood puts it, in Marx's overall work we see a combination of system-integration and social-integration views of how societies persist and change. Questions are asked about the logical compatibilities and incompatibilities of institutional complexes (e.g. contradictions between technology and the institution of private property), as well as about how actors react or fail to react to such incom-

patibilities. It is true of course that, as Althusser has pointed out, Marx's early work puts more emphasis on actors and their struggles, whereas in his late work the focus is more on systemic contradictions and the tendential 'laws of motion' of a mode of production. But, looking at his oeuvre as a whole, there is no doubt that its conceptual framework helps us view the social both in systemic and in actor terms - without conflating the two approaches and without reducing the one to the other.

This is not to deny that there are serious drawbacks in the Marxist holistic framework. It is based on an economistic view of social differentiation that leads, in aprioristic fashion, to the systematic under-emphasis of non-economic institutional spheres and their specific logics. It also leads to the underemphasis of actors' struggles over the non-economic means of social construction (political, cultural).

Of course, humanist and voluntaristic versions of Marxism have tried to overcome economism by stressing the relative autonomy of the political or the ideological. But in so far as they continue to conceptualize and analyse the non-economic levels by the use of economic categories (such as class, reproductive requirements of capital, etc.), they have not succeeded in overcoming economic reductionism.

If the balance between an action and a systemic perspective is marred by economism, critics have also pointed out difficulties in terms of macro-micro linkages. Marxism, focusing on such macro-phenomena as class struggles, mass movements, revolutions, etc., has neglected to show how these relate to the actions and interactions of concrete individuals in the context of their everyday existence; it has failed, in other words, to provide micro-foundations of societal stability and change. This failure is responsible, say the critics, for essentialism, for the reification of social structures, for a view of society as a mystical entity pulling all the strings behind the actors' backs. Moreover, essentialism is reinforced by Marx's philosophical materialism - both leading to a constant reference by Marxists to material structures, material conditions, material struggles. This accent on the material goes strongly against the current linguistic and cultural trend in the social sciences today, against the growing realization that all aspects of social life, from ideologies to stock markets, are symbolically constructed.

The decline of the Marxist macro-holistic framework is not, of course, exclusively due to its theoretical weaknesses. A full explanation must link intra-theoretical with extra-theoretical developments, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the generalized crisis of the Left, the neoliberal character of present-day globalization, etc. But the internal logic and dynamic of the debates of how societal wholes are constituted, reproduced and transformed is also important to the understanding of not only the decline of Marxism but, more to the point, the theoretical failure to replace it with a less economistic and less essentialist holism --a holism useful for raising in a theoretically coherent manner questions about the functioning and transformation of nation-states in today's globalized, late modernity.

If it is true that globalization does not lead to the decline or disappearance of the nation-state but to a radical change in its functions, it is also true that at present we lack the conceptual tools for systematically studying either this transformation or the global system within which nation-states are embedded. This is to say that, even in late

modernity, the need persists for an investigation of nation-states and their development within the global system. The present 'anti-foundationalist' postmodern trend in the social sciences, however, tends to reject any attempt at constructing conceptual tools for such a holistic investigation on the grounds that any type of holism leads to essentialism and eventually to political authoritarianism. This state of affairs may suit the defenders of the global, neoliberal status quo, but it definitely undermines the efforts of both those who want to understand better the present character of the globalization process, and those who want to change it in an emancipatory direction.

## **2. Parsonian functionalism: the emphasis on system/structure**

Talcott Parsons is rightly considered the father of modern sociological theory. It was his work that established sociological theory as a sub-discipline within sociology, specializing in the systematic production, not of substantive theories (not Generalities III, to use Althusser's useful terminology) but of conceptual tools (Generalities II) which prepare the ground for the empirical investigation of the social world. They do so by helping us to overcome empiricism and to ask sociological rather than merely social questions about the social world.

Parsons' holistic paradigm should be assessed along two basic axes: the micro-macro and the action-system dimensions. In contrast to Marx, in Parsons the methodological balance of social and system integration is upset in favour of the latter. Particularly in the middle and late phases of his work, as he moved from the analysis of the unit act to the theorization of the social system, the voluntaristic dimension of his theory becomes peripheralized or disappears altogether. As many critics have noted, in phases II and III of Parsons' works the direction of influence is always from the system and its functional requirements to the actors and their roles, rather than the other way around. Actors (particularly collective actors) are either portrayed as passive products of systemic determinations, or they disappear completely from the social scene.

More specifically, consider the three-level relationship of the cultural, the social and the personality systems. Parsons always starts with the core values of the cultural system, which are then institutionalized into roles/normative requirements at the social-system level, and finally internalized in the form of needs/dispositions at the level of the personality system. The direction is invariably from core values to normative expectations and need dispositions - never the other way round. We are never encouraged to ask how core values are constructed or trans-formed, how actors creatively handle their roles while playing interactive games, or how actors, through constant reflexive accounting, set about making sense of the games in which they are involved.

If in the above instance actors are portrayed as mere puppets, they disappear altogether in the Parsonian subdivision of the social system into the four famous subsystems (adaptation/economic, goal-achievement/ political, integration/social and latency/value-commitment - AGIL for short). They vanish, because each subsystem is further divided into four sub-subsystems following the same systemic, institutional logic. This results in an onion-like (system within system) view of society where broad systems contain less encompassing subsystems. Within this frame-work the theoretical space for actors,

particularly collective actors, is obliterated. If collective actors do make an appearance in Parsons' more empirical work, it is despite, not because of, the AGIL scheme.

It is important to stress, however, that, contra Parsons' early critics (Ralph Dahrendorf, C. Wright Mills), this passivity does not entail norm conformity. The American theorist repeatedly states that whether or not actors comply with their roles' normative requirements is a matter of empirical investigation. Sometimes they do; at other times they do not. The passivity has rather more to do with the fact that Parsons fails to show how role players, conforming to normative requirements or not, handle such requirements in actual interactive contexts. It is the difference between knowing or 'orienting oneself' to game rules, and actually applying such rules in a syntagmatically unfolding game. As it has rightly been pointed out, Parsons' actors are constantly rehearsing their roles but the actual play never starts; the theatre curtain never rises. There is more orientation to than 'instatiation' of rules. The analysis always moves on the paradigmatic or institutional level, rarely on the syntagmatic, interactive one.

Another point to be made here is that, as far as the construction of a holistic paradigm is concerned, one can find useful elements in the Parsonian synthesis. First of all, Parsons rejects economism. In dealing with the differentiation of institutional spheres in modern societies, he clearly refuses any privileging of the economic. Following Weber, he argues that the problem of sphere dominance is an empirical question, and that therefore the construction of conceptual tools should not lead to the a priori favouring of one sphere over the others. It is true, of course, that Parsons' late work moves from the Weberian position on the issue of institutional dominance to the a priori privileging of the cultural sphere via his cybernetic hierarchy scheme. But this does not undermine Parsons' previous efforts to conceptualize the differentiation of modern societies into spheres with their own specific logic and values, spheres whose relationships are amenable to an open-ended empirical investigation.

Another positive contribution by Parsons towards the construction of a holistic paradigm is that, unlike Marx, he does provide conceptual bridges (albeit inadequate ones) for linking the macro with the micro level of analysis. His conceptualization of social systems and subsystems is so constructed that it can be applied to the empirical study not only of societal systems but of all types of social whole - macro, meso and micro. In fact, Parsons' numerous disciples have used the functional-structural paradigm for the empirical investigation of social systems ranging from empires and nation-states to formal organizations and small groups.' Now one might argue that the micro-macro bridges that Parsons offers do not overcome the systemic bias of his overall scheme, and that in this sense, as his critics have emphasized, his categories tend to lead to essentialist views of the social. However, it is better to have system-privileging bridges than no bridges at all.

### **3. Interpretative Micro-Sociologies: The Emphasis on Agency**

The development of interpretative micro-sociological paradigms in the 1960s and 1970s can be seen as a reaction (or rather over-reaction) to the non-voluntaristic, oversystemic aspects of the Parsonian synthesis. With symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, actors are seen (contra Parsons) as producers rather than passive

products of their social world. With interaction/intersubjectivity and reflexive interaction put at the centre of the analysis, the concern is less with how roles influence actors' behaviour or the extent to which actors do or do not conform to normative expectations, and more with how actors creatively use their roles in their attempts to interact with others and to participate actively in complex social games. In doing so their concern with meaning goes beyond Weber's emphasis on *verstehen*. They are less interested in meaning as an end-product and more in the ongoing construction of meanings in interactive contexts. This leads them to explain social order less in terms of common values and norms (as Talcott Parsons does) than in terms of social skills, of emergent situational meanings (George Mead, Herbert Blumer) - and, in the case of ethnomethodology, of taken-for-granted cognitive assumptions about the reality of the social world and the commonality of perspectives (Harold Garfinkel; Aaron Cicourel).

There is no doubt that both symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology do bring into the analysis the voluntaristic aspects that Parsons' "voluntaristic" theory has neglected; in that sense their provision of micro-foundations does combat the essentialism of both the Marxist and the Parsonian holistic schemes. However, micro-sociologists' excessive fear of reification makes them reject all macro-concepts (such as social structure, societal differentiation, class struggles, etc.) as referring to imaginary essences clouding the obvious truth that all social phenomena are symbolically constructed. This has created obstacles in the way of developing micro-macro, linkages. It has led to the rejection of all conventional macro-sociologies, and/or to the reductive and empiricist idea that one should first understand and empirically investigate the micro-worlds of day-to-day interaction before moving on to tackle issues referring to macro-phenomena.

Although this micro-imperialistic tendency is somewhat mitigated in later developments, there is no doubt that interpretative micro-sociologists' suspicion of macro-concepts has created serious obstacles to the construction of a holistic paradigm capable of integrating, of creating effective bridges between micro and macro approaches to the study of social phenomena. This has caused micro-sociologists to turn their backs on the types of issue (e.g. about the emergence, reproduction and long-term development of nation-states) that were so central to the writings of classical sociologists from Marx to Durkheim and Weber. That type of social myopia was further exacerbated by the erroneous tendency to link face-to-face interactions with the micro-level of analysis, and institutional structures with the macro. This is quite wrong. Face-to-face interaction involving powerful actors, such as heads of state for instance, have consequences which, to use Giddens' terminology, stretch very widely in time and space. Moreover, as Parsons has convincingly shown, institutional structures can be both macro and micro; they can refer to whole societies, formal organizations, communities or small groups.

Interpretative micro-sociologies suffer from yet another limitation. Their adherents' fear of reification results in a rejection of not only all macro-concepts, but also all systemic concepts - whether macro or micro. So, for instance, the idea of a system's functional requirements or needs for survival/reproduction are considered an illegitimate use of biological concepts in a field which should focus not on organisms but on interacting agents and their symbolic constructions. In this view of the social world as an

interactive accomplishment, all social-science concepts must directly refer to actors and their meanings, interpretations and strategies. It is argued that any attempt to complement or combine an action with a systemic orientation would unavoidably lead to the essentialist construction by sociologists of mysterious, imaginary entities misleadingly shown as pulling all the strings behind the actors' backs. The fact that an exclusive focus on action concepts often results in 'empirical findings' that the actual participants in the games being investigated find obvious or trivial does not deter interpretative micro-sociologists from their refusal to combine social- with system-integration perspectives.

In conclusion, interpretative micro-sociologists have provided us with micro-foundations of value for overcoming the essentialism found in the holistic paradigms of both Marx and Parsons. On the other hand their over-reaction to holism, their tendency to reject macro as well as systemic concepts (micro and macro) seriously obstructs any attempt at creating a new holistic paradigm that aims, in both the micro-macro and the actor-system perspectives, at replacing walls with bridges.

#### **4. The Rational-Choice Paradigm**

##### **4.1. The Ideal-Typical Nature of Rational-Choice Theory**

Rational-choice theory, in both its Marxist and non-Marxist variants, constitutes another important attempt to overcome, via the provision of micro-foundations, the essentialism of conventional holistic paradigms. Following the neoclassical, homo economicus tradition, it is based on the idea of actors making choices on the basis of optimization or maximization criteria. To the often repeated criticism of empirically oriented social psychologists and micro-sociologists that homo rationalis is a fiction, that human beings do not behave in the perfectly rational way the model implies, rational-choice theorists reply that despite or because of its ideal-typical exaggeration the model provides useful tools for illuminating a number of phenomena on both the micro-and the macro-level of analysis.

Consider, for instance, the case of an entrepreneur having to decide whether or not to go ahead with a specific investment strategy. Industrial sociologists will point out that if we abandon armchair modelling and investigate real actors taking actual decisions in specific settings, we shall find serious discrepancies between the empirical findings and the rational-choice model. Rational-choice theorists accept that such discrepancies are inevitable, but argue that, following Weber, their constructions are not substantive theories but ideal types whose exaggerated, 'unrealistic' character does not negate their heuristic utility. Let us take as an example the rational-choice-based statement that a rise in interest rates will, other things being equal, lead to a drop in the rate of investment. A critic may well object that in actual life other things are never equal; that, for instance, a rise in interest rates might, contra the model's prediction, be related to a rise in investment if the state intervenes and provides other incentives to interested entrepreneurs, such as tax reductions.

The rational-choice reply to the above objection is that the model's logico-deductive character helps one to formulate certain tendencies (e.g. that of the investment rate to fall when interest rates rise) - tendencies that can, of course, be neutralized or reversed

by countertendencies. Therefore it is a question of articulating the rational-choice, logico-deductive approach with a historico-genetic one: an approach focusing more on specific historical and institutional contexts - an approach, in other words, capable of showing in which conditions the tendencies derived from the logico-deductive model will materialize and in which conditions they will not.

However, rational-choice theorists cannot show us how to articulate the logico-deductive with the historico-genetic, institutional approach. Neither, as argued below, can they tell us how to safeguard the elegance and rigour of the rational-choice theory once the historical, institutional dimension is seriously taken into account. If, for instance, both goals and means of achieving them are historically and culturally specific, what exactly is the use of a theoretical paradigm based on transcultural, transhistorical orientations? Could it be that such orientations lead to quasi-universal generalizations which, like all such constructions in the social sciences, are either trivial or actually wrong (wrong in the sense that they are valid only under certain conditions not specified in the theory)?

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### **Biographical Sketch**

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