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THE CONSTITUTION
OF SOCIETY

Introduction

The backdrop to this book is to be found in a series of significant developments which have taken place in the social sciences over the past decade and a half. These have been concentrated in substantial part in social theory, and bear especially upon that most maligned and most provocative of the social sciences, sociology. Sociology is by its very nature controversial. However, for a considerable period after the Second World War, particularly in the English-speaking world, there was a broad consensus about its nature and tasks and about those of the social sciences as a whole. There was, it could be said, a middle ground shared by otherwise competing perspectives, a terrain on which intellectual battles could be fought out. During that period sociology was an academic growth area, a subject with a burgeoning reputation, even if it remained distinctly unpopular in many circles. It was dominated internationally by American sociology, and in social theory the influence of Talcott Parsons was marked. The prestige enjoyed by Parsons's ideas can be exaggerated retrospectively — many found his taste for abstraction and obscurity unattractive, and he had his fair share of critics and detractors. However, *The Structure of Social Action*, first published in the late 1930s but widely known only in the post-war period, was in more than one way a key work in the formation of modern sociology. In it Parsons established a systematic pedigree for social theory, based upon an interpretation of European thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The work of Durkheim, Max Weber and Pareto loomed large, but Marx played a very slight role indeed. The writings of the 1890—1920 generation had supposedly gone beyond Marx in all important respects, sifting out what was valuable and discarding the dross.

The book also set up an approach to social theory of a very definite type, combining a sophisticated version of functionalism and a naturalistic conception of sociology. Parsons's subsequent writings elaborated these views in considerable detail, emphasizing that although human action has very special and distinctive attributes, social science by and large shares the same logical framework as natural science. Himself writing and working in an American context, Parsons's attempt to pinpoint the origins of his thought in European social theory actually served to reinforce the dominant position of American sociology. For Durkheim, Weber and Pareto were regarded as forerunners of the development of the 'action frame of reference', to be given its full expression by Parsons and his colleagues. Sociology may have its main theoretical origins in Europe, but the further elaboration of the subject was a task that had been largely transferred across the Atlantic. Curiously, this result was achieved at the expense of a concomitant recognition of the importance of indigenous American contributions to social theory; G. H. Mead received short shrift in *The Structure of Social Action*, as Parsons came later to acknowledge. To this day, however, there are textbooks on social theory, or 'sociological theory', emanating from the United States, which begin with the classic European thinkers but then convey the impression that social theory in Europe subsequently came to a stop — any further progress is taken to be a purely American affair.

But even within the confines of the debates deriving directly from Parsons's writings, some of the leading contributors were European. Marxism has long been a much more important influence in European than in American intellectual culture, and some of Parsons's most perceptive critics drew inspiration from Marx as well as from readings of Weber rather different from those which Parsons had made. Dahrendorf, Lockwood, Rex and others of a similar standpoint took the theoretical content of Parsons's work much more seriously than did his American radical critics (C. Wright Mills and, later, Gouldner). The former group regarded Parsons's contributions as of major importance but as one-sided in neglecting phenomena they saw as primary in Marx — class division, conflict and power. They were not themselves Marxists, but they envisaged something of a fusion between Parsonian and Marxist concepts. While there were many

important innovations within Marxism during this period — such as the revival of interest in the 'young Marx', attempts to merge Marxism and phenomenology, and subsequently Marxism and structuralism — these were not well known to those who called themselves 'sociologists', even in Europe. Those who regarded themselves as both sociologists and Marxists tended to share the basic assumptions of functionalism and naturalism, which is one reason why much common ground for debate was found.

The fissures in this common ground opened up remarkably suddenly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and they went very deep. There is no doubt that their origins were as much political as intellectual. But whatever their provenance, they had the effect of largely dissolving whatever consensus had existed before about how social theory should be approached. In its place there appeared a baffling variety of competing theoretical perspectives, none able fully to recapture the pre-eminence formerly enjoyed by the 'orthodox consensus'. It became apparent to those working in sociology that all along there had in fact been less of a consensus about the nature of social theory than many had imagined. Some traditions of thought, such as symbolic interactionism, had all the while been accorded considerable support without storming the citadel of the orthodox consensus. Other schools of thought that had developed in large part separately from the main body of the social sciences were taken seriously for the first time, including phenomenology and the critical theory of the Frankfurt philosophers. Some traditions which had seemed moribund were given a new impetus. Although Weber had been influenced by the hermeneutic tradition and had incorporated its main concept of *verstehen* into his work, most of those connected with sociology would certainly not have regarded 'hermeneutics' as part of their lexicon. But, partly in conjunction with phenomenology, interpretative traditions in social thought again came to the fore. Finally, other styles of thought, such as ordinary language philosophy, were adopted into social theory in various ways.

With these developments the centre of gravity in respect of innovative contributions to social theory moved back towards Europe.* It became obvious that a great deal of the more

*References may be found on pp. xxxvi — xxxvii.

interesting theoretical work was going on there — and for the most part in languages other than English. European social theory was, and is, not only alive but kicking very vigorously. But what is the outcome of these stirrings? For the loss of the centre ground formerly occupied by the orthodox consensus has seemingly left social theory in a hopeless disarray. Notwithstanding the babble of rival theoretical voices, it is possible to discern certain common themes in this apparent confusion. One is that most of the schools of thought in question — with notable exceptions, such as structuralism and 'post-structuralism' — emphasize the active, reflexive character of human conduct. That is to say, they are unified in their rejection of the tendency of the orthodox consensus to see human behaviour as the result of forces that actors neither control nor comprehend. In addition (and this does include both structuralism and 'post-structuralism'), they accord a fundamental role to language, and to cognitive faculties in the explication of social life. Language use is embedded in the concrete activities of day-to-day life and is in some sense partly constitutive of those activities. Finally, the declining importance of empiricist philosophies of natural science is recognized to have profound implications for the social sciences also. It is not just the case that social and natural science are further apart than advocates of the orthodox consensus believed. We now see that a philosophy of natural science must take account of just those phenomena in which the new schools of social theory are interested — in particular, language and the interpretation of meaning.

It is with these three core sets of issues, and their mutual connections, that the theory of structuration, as I represent it in this book, is concerned. 'Structuration' is an unlovely term at best, although it is less inelegant in the Gallic context from which it came. I have not been able to think of a more engaging word for the views I want to convey. In elaborating the concepts of structuration theory, I do not intend to put forward a potentially new orthodoxy to replace the old one. But structuration theory is sensitive to the shortcomings of the orthodox consensus and to the significance of the convergent developments noted above.

In case there is any doubt about terminology here, let me emphasize that I use the term 'social theory' to encompass issues that I hold to be the concern of all the social sciences. These

issues are to do with the nature of human action and the acting self, with how interaction should be conceptualized and its relation to institutions; and with grasping the practical connotations of social analysis. I understand 'sociology', by contrast, to be not a generic discipline to do with the study of human societies as a whole, but that branch of social science which focuses particularly upon the 'advanced' or modern societies. Such a disciplinary characterization implies an intellectual division of labour, nothing more. While there are theorems and concepts which belong distinctively to the industrialized world, there is no way in which something called 'sociological theory' can be clearly distinguished from the more general concepts and concerns of social theory. 'Sociological theory', in other words, can if one likes be regarded as a branch of social theory more generally, but it cannot sustain a wholly separate identity. This book is written with a definite sociological bias, in the sense that I tend to concentrate upon material particularly relevant to modern societies. But as an introduction to structuration theory it is also intended in substantial degree as a formulation of the tasks of social theory in general and is 'theory' in the same sense. That is to say, the focus is upon the understanding of human agency and of social institutions.

'Social theory' is not a term which has any precision, but it is a very useful one for all that. As I represent it, 'social theory' involves the analysis of issues which spill over into philosophy, but it is not primarily a philosophical endeavour. The social sciences are lost if they are not directly related to philosophical problems by those who practise them. To demand that social scientists be alive to philosophical issues is not the same as driving social science into the arms of those who might claim that it is inherently speculative rather than empirical. Social theory has the task of providing conceptions of the nature of human social activity and of the human agent which can be placed in the service of empirical work. The main concern of social theory is the same as that of the social sciences in general: the illumination of concrete processes of social life. To hold that philosophical debates can contribute to this concern is not to suppose that such debates need to be resolved conclusively before worthwhile social research can be initiated. On the contrary, the prosecution of social research can in principle cast light on philosophical

controversies just as much as the reverse. In particular, I think it wrong to slant social theory too unequivocally towards abstract and highly generalized questions of epistemology, as if any significant developments in social science had to await a clear-cut solution to these.

A few remarks are necessary about the 'theory' in social theory. There are certain senses often attributed to 'theory' in the social sciences from which I want to maintain some considerable distance. One conception used to be popular among some of those associated with the orthodox consensus, although it is no longer widely held today. This is the view — influenced by certain versions of the logical empiricist philosophy of natural science — that the only form of 'theory' worthy of the name is that expressible as a set of deductively related laws or generalizations. This sort of notion has turned out to be of quite limited application even within the natural sciences. If it can be sustained at all, it is only in respect of certain areas of natural science. Anyone who would seek to apply it to social science must recognize that (as yet) there is no theory at all: its construction is an aspiration deferred to a remote future, a goal to be striven for rather than an actual part of the current pursuits of the social sciences.

Although this view does have some adherents even now, it is far removed from anything to which I would hold that social theory could or should aspire — for reasons which will emerge clearly enough in the body of the book which follows. But there is a weaker version of it which still commands a very large following and which invites rather longer discussion even in this prefatory context. This is the idea that the 'theory' in social theory must consist essentially of generalizations if it is to have explanatory content. According to such a standpoint, much of what passes for 'social theory' consists of conceptual schemes rather than (as should be the case) 'explanatory propositions' of a generalizing type.

Two problems have to be separated here. One concerns the nature of explanation in the social sciences. I shall take it for granted that explanation is contextual, the clearing up of queries. Now it *might* be held that the only queries worth their salt in social science are those of a very generalized kind, which can therefore be answered only by reference to abstract generalizations. But

such a view has little to commend it, since it does not help to clarify the explanatory import of much of what social scientists (or natural scientists either, for that matter) do. Most 'why?' questions do not need a generalization to answer them, nor do the answers logically imply that there must be some generalizations lurking around which could be invoked to back up the answers. Such observations have become fairly commonplace in the philosophical literature, and I shall not try to extend them further. Much more contentious is a second claim I defend, and elaborate in the book, that the uncovering of generalizations is not the be-all and end-all of social theory. If the proponents of 'theory as explanatory generalization' have too narrowly confined the nature of 'explanation', they have compounded the error by failing to inquire closely enough into what generalization is, and should be, in social science.

Generalizations tend towards two poles, with a range and variety of possible shadings between them. Some hold because actors themselves know them — in some guise — and apply them in the enactment of what they do. The social scientific observer does not in fact have to 'discover' these generalizations, although that observer may give a new discursive form to them. Other generalizations refer to circumstances, or aspects of circumstances, of which agents are ignorant and which effectively 'act' on them, independent of whatever the agents may believe they are up to. Those I shall call 'structural sociologists' tend to be interested only in generalization in this second sense — indeed, this is what is meant when it is claimed that the 'theory' in social theory should comprise explanatory generalizations. But the first is just as fundamental to social science as the second, and each form of generalization is unstable in respect of the other. The circumstances in which generalizations about what 'happens' to agents hold are mutable in respect of what those agents can learn knowledgeably to 'make happen'. From this derives the (logically open) transformative impact which the social sciences can have upon their 'subject matter'. But from it also comes the fact that the discovery of 'laws' — i.e., generalizations of type 2 — is only one concern among others that are equally important to the theoretical content of social science. Chief among these other concerns is the provision of conceptual means for analysing what actors know about why they act as they do, particularly either

where they are not aware (discursively) that they know it, or where actors in other contexts lack such awareness. These tasks are primarily hermeneutic in character, but they are an inherent and necessary part of social theory. The 'theory' involved in 'social theory' does not consist only, or even primarily, of the formulation of generalizations (of type 2). Neither are the concepts developed under the rubric 'social theory' made up only of those which can be fed into such generalizations. Quite to the contrary, these concepts must be related to others referring to the knowledgeable of agents, to which they are inevitably tied.

Most of the controversies stimulated by the so-called 'linguistic turn' in social theory, and by the emergence of post-empiricist philosophies of science, have been strongly epistemological in character. They have been concerned, in other words, with questions of relativism, problems of verification and falsification and so on. Significant as these may be, concentration upon epistemological issues draws attention away from the more 'ontological' concerns of social theory, and it is these upon which structuration theory primarily concentrates. Rather than becoming preoccupied with epistemological disputes and with the question of whether or not anything like 'epistemology' in its time-honoured sense can be formulated at all, those working in social theory, I suggest, should be concerned first and foremost with reworking conceptions of human being and human doing, social reproduction and social transformation. Of prime importance in this respect is a dualism that is deeply entrenched in social theory, a division between objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism was a third -ism characterizing the orthodox consensus, together with naturalism and functionalism. In spite of Parsons's terminology of the action frame of reference¹, there is no doubt that in his theoretical scheme the object (society) predominates over the subject (the knowledgeable human agent). Others whose views could be associated with that consensus were very much less sophisticated in this respect than was Parsons. By attacking objectivism — and structural sociology — those influenced by hermeneutics or by phenomenology were able to lay bare major shortcomings of those views. But they in turn veered sharply towards subjectivism. The conceptual divide between subject and social object yawned as widely as ever. Structuration theory is based on the premise that this dualism

has to be reconceptualized as a duality — the duality of structure. Although recognizing the significance of the 'linguistic turn', it is not a version of hermeneutics or interpretative sociology. While acknowledging that society is not the creation of individual subjects, it is distant from any conception of structural sociology. The attempt to formulate a coherent account of human agency and of structure demands, however, a very considerable conceptual effort. An exposition of these views is offered in the opening chapter and is further developed throughout the book. It leads on directly to other main themes, especially that of the study of time-space relations. The structural properties of social systems exist only in so far as forms of social conduct are reproduced chronically across time and space. The structuration of institutions can be understood in terms of how it comes about that social activities become 'stretched' across wide spans of time-space. Incorporating time-space in the heart of social theory means thinking again about some of the disciplinary divisions which separate sociology from history and from geography. The concept and analysis of history is particularly problematic. This book, indeed, might be accurately described as an extended reflection upon a celebrated and oft-quoted phrase to be found in Marx. Marx comments that 'Men [let us immediately say human beings] make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.'² Well, so they do. But what a diversity of complex problems of social analysis this apparently innocuous pronouncement turns out to disclose!

¹ The phrase is to be found in the introductory paragraphs of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It was made in a polemical vein; those who are ignorant of history, Marx says, may be condemned to repeat it, perhaps even farcically. The exact quotation in the original goes as follows: 'Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen. Die Tradition aller toten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden. Und wenn sie eben damit beschäftigt scheinen, sich und die Dinge umzuwälzen, noch nicht Dagewesenes zu schaffen, gerade in solchen Epochen revolutionärer Krisen beschwören sie ängstlich die Geister der Vergangenheit zu ihrem Dienste herauf, entlehnen ihnen Namen, Schlachtparole, Kostüm, um in dieser altherwürdigen Verkleidung und mit dieser erbutigen Sprache die neue Weltgeschichtsszene aufzuführen.' (Marx and Engels: *Werke*, Vol 8, Berlin: Dietz Verlag 1960, p. 115).

In formulating this account of structuration theory I have not been reluctant to draw upon ideas from quite divergent sources. To some this may appear an unacceptable eclecticism, but I have never been able to see the force of this type of objection. There is an undeniable comfort in working within established traditions of thought — the more so, perhaps, given the very diversity of approaches that currently confronts anyone who is outside any single tradition. The comfort of established views can, however, easily be a cover for intellectual sloth. If ideas are important and illuminating, what matters much more than their origin is to be able to sharpen them so as to demonstrate their usefulness, even if within a framework which might be quite different from that which helped to engender them. Thus, for example, I acknowledge the call for a decentring of the subject and regard this as basic to structuration theory. But I do not accept that this implies the evaporation of subjectivity into an empty universe of signs. Rather, social practices, hitherto into space and time, are considered to be at the root of the constitution of both subject and social object. I admit the central significance of the 'linguistic turn', introduced especially by hermeneutic phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy. At the same time, however, I hold this term to be in some part a misleading one. The most important developments as regards social theory concern not so much a turn towards language as an altered view of the intersection between saying (or signifying) and doing, offering a novel conception of *praxis*. The radical transmutation of hermeneutics and phenomenology initiated by Heidegger, together with the innovations of the later Wittgenstein, are the two main signal markers on the new path. But to pursue this path further means precisely to shake off any temptation to become a full-blown disciple of either of these thinkers.

Let me offer here a short summary of the organization of the book. Having given in the first chapter an outline of the chief concepts involved in structuration theory, in the second I begin the more substantive part of the volume with a discussion of consciousness, the unconscious and the constitution of day-to-day life. Human agents or actors — I use these terms interchangeably — have, as an inherent aspect of what they do, the capacity to understand what they do while they do it. The reflexive capacities of the human actor are characteristically

involved in a continuous manner with the flow of day-to-day conduct in the contexts of social activity. But reflexivity operates only partly on a discursive level. What agents know about what they do, and why they do it — their knowledgeability as agents — is largely carried in practical consciousness. Practical consciousness consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to 'go on' in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression. The significance of practical consciousness is a leading theme of the book, and it has to be distinguished from both consciousness (discursive consciousness) and the unconscious. While accepting the importance of unconscious aspects of cognition and motivation, I do not think we can be content with some of the more conventionally established views of these. I adopt a modified version of ego psychology but endeavour to relate this directly to what, I suggest, is a fundamental concept of structuration theory — that of *routinization*.

The routine (whatever is done habitually) is a basic element of day-to-day social activity. I use the phrase 'day-to-day social activity' in a very literal sense, not in the more complex, and I think more ambiguous, way which has become familiar through phenomenology. The term 'day-to-day' encapsulates exactly the routinized character which social life has as it stretches across time-space. The repetitiveness of activities which are undertaken in like manner day after day is the material grounding of what I call the recursive nature of social life. (By its recursive nature I mean that the structured properties of social activity — via the duality of structure — are constantly recreated out of the very resources which constitute them.) Routinization is vital to the psychological mechanisms whereby a sense of trust or ontological security is sustained in the daily activities of social life. Carried primarily in practical consciousness, routine drives a wedge between the potentially explosive content of the unconscious and the reflexive monitoring of action which agents display. Why did Garfinkel's 'experiments with trust' stimulate such a very strong reaction of anxiety on the part of those involved, seemingly out of all proportion to the trivial nature of the circumstances of their origin? Because, I think, the apparently minor conventions of daily social life are of essential significance in curbing the sources of unconscious tension that would otherwise preoccupy most of

our waking lives.

The situated character of action in time-space, the routinization of activity and the repetitive nature of day-to-day life — these are phenomena which connect discussion of the unconscious with Goffman's analyses of co-presence. In spite of their manifest brilliance, Goffman's writings are usually thought of as perhaps somewhat lightweight in respect of their theoretical content, either because he is regarded above all as a sort of sociological *raconteur* — the equivalent of a sociological gossip whose observations entertain and titillate but are none the less superficial and essentially picaresque — or because what he portrays is specific to social life in modern, middle-class society, a cynical society of amoral role players. There is something in each of these views, and to a certain degree Goffman is vulnerable to them because he refrains from drawing out, in a fully systematic way, the implications of his standpoint. Where he does do so he tends to link the rituals of day-to-day social life to ethnological accounts of the behaviour of the higher animals and to explicate them in those terms. This may indeed be instructive, but it is not the most useful way of relating his work to problems of social theory because it does not plug the right gaps in what he has to say. One such gap is the absence of an account of motivation, the main reason why his writings are open to the second interpretation mentioned above. I try to show how an analysis of motivation, as developed in relation to routinization and the unconscious, can bring out the systematic character of Goffman's work more fully. Goffman's emphasis on trust and tact strikingly echoes themes found in ego psychology and generates an analytically powerful understanding of the reflexive monitoring of the flux of encounters involved in daily life.

Fundamental to social life is the positioning of the body in social encounters. 'Positioning' here is a rich term. The body is positioned in the immediate circumstances of co-presence in relation to others: Goffman provides an extraordinarily subtle but telling set of observations about face work, about gesture and reflexive control of bodily movement as inherent in the continuity of social life. Positioning is, however, also to be understood in relation to the seriality of encounters across time-space. Every individual is at once positioned in the flow of day-to-day life: in the life-span which is the duration of his or her existence; and in

the duration of 'institutional time', the 'supra-individual' structuration of social institutions. Finally, each person is positioned, in a 'multiple' way, within social relations conferred by specific social identities: this is the main sphere of application of the concept of social role. The modalities of co-presence, mediated directly by the sensory properties of the body, are clearly different from social ties and forms of social interaction established with others absent in time or in space.

It is not only individuals who are 'positioned' relative to one another; the contexts of social interaction are also. In examining these connections, to do with the contextuality of social interaction, the techniques and approach of time-geography, as developed by Hägerstrand, are highly illuminating. Time-geography also has as its principal concern the location of individuals in time-space but gives particular attention to constraints over activity deriving from physical properties of the body and of environments in which agents move. Reference to these is but one of the respects in which sociology can profit from the writings of geographers. Another is the interpretation of urbanism, which, I argue, has a basic part to play in social theory; and, of course, a general sensitivity to space and place is of even greater importance.

Goffman gives some considerable attention to the regionalization of encounters, and I take the notion of regionalization to be a very significant one for social theory. It has always been a main concern of the writings of geographers, but I want to regard it as less of a purely spatial concept than they ordinarily do. The situated nature of social interaction can usefully be examined in relation to the different locales through which the daily activities of individuals are co-ordinated. Locales are not just places but settings of interaction: as Garfinkel has demonstrated particularly persuasively, settings are used chronically — and largely in a tacit way — by social actors to sustain meaning in communicative acts. But settings are also regionalized in ways that heavily influence, and are influenced by, the serial character of encounters. Time-space 'fixity' also normally means social fixity; the substantially 'given' character of the physical *milieux* of day-to-day life interlaces with routine and is deeply influential in the contours of institutional reproduction. Regionalization also has strong psychological and social resonance in respect of the 'enclosure'

From view of some types of activities and some types of people and the 'disclosure' of others. Here we again find a major point of connection between seemingly disparate ideas, those of Goffman and Foucault: both accord great importance to the socially and historically fluctuating lines between enclosure and disclosure, confinement and display.

I think it is a mistake to regard encounters in circumstances of co-presence as in some way the basis upon which larger, or 'macrostructural', social properties are built. So-called 'micro-sociological' study does not deal with a reality that is somehow more substantial than that with which 'macrosociological' analysis is concerned. But neither, on the contrary, is interaction in situations of co-presence simply ephemeral, as contrasted to the solidity of large-scale or long-established institutions. Each view has its proponents, but I see this division of opinion as an empty one and as a slightly more concrete version of the dualism in social theory already mentioned. The opposition between 'micro' and 'macro' is best reconceptualized as concerning how interaction in contexts of co-presence is structurally implicated in such systems span large sectors of time-space. And this in turn is best investigated as a problem of the connection of social with system integration, as I define these terms. But a vital rider has to be added to this. The relation of social to system integration cannot be grasped on a purely abstract level; the theory of urbanism is essential to it. For it is only with the advent of cities — and, in modern times, with the urbanism of the 'created environment' — that a significant development of system integration becomes possible.

We have to be very careful indeed with the concept of 'social system' and the associated notion of 'society'. They sound innocent terms, and they are probably indispensable if used with appropriate measures of caution. 'Society' has a useful double meaning, which I have relied upon — signifying a bounded system, and social association in general. An emphasis upon regionalization helps to remind us that the degree of 'systemness' in social systems is very variable and that 'societies' rarely have easily specifiable boundaries — until, at least, we enter the modern world of nation-states. Functionalism and naturalism tend to encourage unthinking acceptance of societies as clearly delimited

entities, and social systems as internally highly integrated unities. For such perspectives, even where direct organic metaphors are rejected, tend to be closely allied to biological concepts; and these have usually been arrived at with reference to entities clearly set off from the world around them, having an evident internal unity. But 'societies' are very often not like this at all. To help take account of that, I introduce the terms 'intersocietal systems' and 'time-space edges', referring to different aspects of regionalization which cut across social systems recognizably distinct as societies. I also use these notions extensively in assessing interpretations of social change later in the book.

In formulating structuration theory I wish to escape from the dualism associated with objectivism and subjectivism. But some critics have felt that not enough weight is given to factors emphasized by the first of these, particularly in respect of the constraining aspects of the structural properties of social systems. To show that such is not the case I indicate in some detail what 'constraint' can be taken to mean in social theory and how the various senses that can be given to the term are understood in the theory of structuration. Recognition of the nature and significance of structural constraint does not mean succumbing to the attractions of structural sociology, but neither, as I try to make clear, do I accept a viewpoint close to methodological individualism. As conceptualized in structuration theory, 'structure' means something different from its usual usage in the social sciences. I also introduce a cluster of other concepts centring upon that of structure and endeavour to show why they are necessary. Most important among these is the idea of 'structural principles', which are structural features of overall societies or societal totalities; I also seek to show that it is through the notion of structural principles that the concept of contradiction can most usefully be specified as relevant to social analysis. These notions again cannot be expressed in purely abstract form, and I examine them with reference to three major types of society that can be distinguished in human history: tribal cultures, class-divided societies and modern nation-states associated with the rise of industrial capitalism.

Mention of history recalls the dictum that human beings make history. What exactly is it that they make — what does 'history' mean here? The answer cannot be expressed in as cogent a form

as the original maxim. There is, of course, a difference between history as events which elapse and history as writing about those events. But this does not get us all that far. History in the first sense is temporality, events in their duration. We tend to associate temporality with a linear sequence, and thus history thought of in this way with movement in a discernible direction. But this may very well be a culture-bound fashion of thinking about time; even if it is not, we still have to avoid the equation of 'history' with social change. For this reason it is worth speaking of 'historicity' as a definite sense of living in a social world constantly exposed to change, in which Marx's maxim is part of a general cultural awareness, not a theorem peculiar to specialist social thinkers. History as the writing of history also poses its own dilemmas and puzzles. All I shall have to say about these is that they are not distinctive; they do not permit us to make clear-cut distinctions between history and social science. Hermeneutic problems involved in the accurate description of divergent forms of life, the interpretation of texts, the explication of action, institutions and social transformation — these are shared by all the social sciences, including history.

How, then, should we approach the study of social change? I try to show that the search for a theory of social change (where 'theory' means in this instance explaining social change by reference to a single set of mechanisms, such as the old evolutionary favourites of adaptation and differential selection) is a doomed one. It is flawed by the same kind of logical shortcomings that attach more generally to the supposition that the social sciences can uncover universal laws of human conduct. The sorts of understanding or knowledge that human beings have of their own 'history' is partly constitutive of what that history is and of the influences that act to change it. However, it is important to give particular critical attention to evolutionism because in one version or another it has been so influential in a variety of different areas of social science. I mean by 'evolutionism', as applied to the social sciences, the explication of social change in terms of schemas which involve the following features: an irreversible series of stages through which societies move, even if it is not held that all individual societies must pass through each of them to reach the higher ones; some conceptual linkage with biological theories of evolution; and the specification of

directionality through the stages indicated, in respect of a given criterion or criteria, such as increasing complexity or expansion of the forces of production. A range of objections can be brought against these ideas, both in respect of their intrinsic demerits and in terms of secondary implications which evolutionism almost inevitably tends to bring in its train, even if they are not logically entailed by it. 'Historical materialism', I think, is a version of evolutionism according to these criteria, in at least one of the main ways in which that contentious term has been understood. If interpreted in this manner, historical materialism manifests several of the main and the secondary limitations of evolutionary theories more generally and has to be rejected for the same reasons.

Since I do not think it possible to compress 'history' into the kinds of scheme favoured by evolutionism in general, or by historical materialism more specifically, I speak of deconstructing rather than reconstructing them. By this I mean that accounts of social change have to take a substantially different form from evolutionism; there is no virtue in trying merely to remodel them somewhat. In addition to concepts already introduced, I make use of two others: those of 'episode' and 'world time' (the first due to Gellner, the second to Eberhard). All social life can be represented as a series of episodes: encounters in circumstances of co-presence certainly have an episodic form. But in this connection I am referring mainly to large-scale processes of change, in which there is some definite type of institutional reorganization, such as the formation of cities in agrarian societies or the formation of early states. Episodes may certainly be fruitfully compared with one another but not in complete abstraction from the context of their origin. The influence of 'world time' is relevant precisely to how far they are in fact comparable. 'World time' concerns the varying conjunctures in history that may affect the conditions and outcomes of seemingly similar episodes and the influence of what the agents involved *know* about such conditions and outcomes. I seek to indicate the analytical purchase of these notions by using as an illustration theories of state formation.

Structuration theory will not be of much value if it does not help to illuminate problems of empirical research, and in the concluding chapter I take up this issue, which I hold to be

inseparable from the implications of structuration theory as a form of critique. I do not try to wield a methodological scalpel. That is to say, I do not believe that there is anything in either the logic or the substance of structuration theory which would somehow prohibit the use of some specific research technique, such as survey methods, questionnaires or whatever. Some considerations brought into play are relevant to the mode of application of particular techniques to research questions and to the interpretation of results, but that is a rather different matter. The points of connection of structuration theory with empirical research are to do with working out the logical implications of studying a 'subject matter' of which the researcher is already a part and with elucidating the substantive connotations of the core notions of action and structure. Some of the points I have made on the abstract level of theory apply directly on the level of research. A good deal of social theory, especially that associated with structural sociology, has treated agents as much less knowledgeable than they really are. The results of this can be very easily discerned in empirical work, in respect of a failure to gain information that allows access to the full range of agents' knowledgeability in at least two ways. What actors are able to say about the conditions of their action and that of others is foreshortened if researchers do not recognize the possible significance of a range of discursive phenomena to which, as social actors themselves, they would certainly pay close attention but which in social research are often simply discounted. These are aspects of discourse which in form are refractory to being rendered as statements of propositional belief or which, like humour or irony, derive their meaning not so much from the content of what is said as from the style, mode of expression or context of utterance. But to this we must add a second factor of greater importance: the need to acknowledge the significance of practical consciousness. Where what agents know about what they do is restricted to what they can say about it, in whatever discursive style, a very wide area of knowledgeability is simply occluded from view. The study of practical consciousness must be incorporated into research work. It would be an error to suppose that non-discursive components of consciousness are necessarily more difficult to study empirically than the discursive, even though agents themselves, by definition, cannot comment

directly on them. The unconscious, on the other hand, poses altogether a different order of problem, certainly demanding techniques of interrogation distinct from those involved in descriptive social research.

Functionalism has been highly important in the social sciences, not only because of its prominence as a type of theorizing but also because of the empirical stimulus it has provided. The origins of fieldwork in anthropology are more or less coterminous with the impact of functionalism, and in sociology also functionalist thought has helped to generate a significant body of research work. I think it essential to understand the attractions of functionalism in this respect, while still holding that conceptually its influence has been largely pernicious. Functionalism has strongly emphasized the significance of unintended consequences of action, especially in so far as such consequences occur in a regular way and are therefore involved in the reproduction of institutionalized aspects of social systems. Functionalists have been quite right to promote this emphasis. But it is entirely possible to study unintended consequences without the use of functionalist concepts. Moreover, the designation of just what is unintentional in regard of the consequences of action can be adequately grasped empirically only if the intentional aspects of action are identified, and this again means operating with an interpretation of agency more sophisticated than is normally held by those inclined towards functionalist premises.

In structuration theory 'structure' is regarded as rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction; institutionalized features of social systems have structural properties in the sense that relationships are stabilized across time and space. Structure can be conceptualized abstractly as two aspects of rules — normative elements and codes of signification. Resources are also of two kinds: authoritative resources, which derive from the co-ordination of the activity of human agents, and allocative resources, which stem from control of material products or of aspects of the material world. What is especially useful for the guidance of research is the study of, first, the routinized intersections of practices which are the 'transformation points' in structural relations and, second, the modes in which institutionalized practices connect social with system integration. As regards the first of these, to take an example, it can be

demonstrated how private property, a cluster of rights of ownership, can be 'translated' into industrial authority, or modes of sustaining managerial control. As regards the second, what has to be ascertained empirically is how far the situated practices studied in a given range of contexts converge with one another in such a way that they enter directly into system reproduction. An alertness to the significance of locales as settings of interaction is important here: there is no reason why sociologists should not adopt some of the research techniques established by geographers, including the graphic techniques of time-geography, in order to study them.

If the social sciences are understood as they were during the period of dominance of the orthodox consensus, their attainments do not look impressive, and the relevance of social research to practical issues seems fairly slight. For the natural sciences, or at least the more advanced of them, have precisely specified and generally accepted laws, together with a fund of uncontroversial empirical observations which can be explicated in terms of those laws. Natural science has become coupled to technological capabilities of an awesome kind, destructive as well as constructive. In the eyes of those who would model social science directly on natural science, the former surely comes off a distant second best. Both cognitively and practically, the social sciences seem distinctly inferior to the natural sciences. But if we accept that social science should no longer be some sort of replica of natural science and is in some respects a quite divergent enterprise, a very different view of their relative achievements and influence can be defended. There are no universal laws in the social sciences, and there will not be any — not, first and foremost, because methods of empirical testing and validation are somehow inadequate but because, as I have pointed out, the causal conditions involved in generalizations about human social conduct are inherently unstable in respect of the very knowledge (or beliefs) that actors have about the circumstances of their own action. The so-called 'self-fulfilling prophecy', of which Merton and others have written, is a special case of a much more generic phenomenon in the social sciences. This is a mutual interpretative interplay between social science and those whose activities compose its subject matter — a 'double hermeneutic'. The theories and findings of the social sciences cannot be kept wholly

separate from the universe of meaning and action which they are about. But, for their part, lay actors are social theorists, whose theories help to constitute the activities and institutions that are the object of study of specialized social observers or social scientists. There is no clear dividing line between informed sociological reflection carried on by lay actors and similar endeavours on the part of specialists. I do not want to deny that there *are* dividing lines, but they are inevitably fuzzy, and social scientists have no absolute monopoly either upon innovative theories or upon empirical investigations of what they study.

All this may perhaps be granted. But it still might not be accepted from these comments and impact of the social sciences to view of the accomplishments and impact of the social sciences to that indicated above. How could it seriously be suggested that social science has had as much influence, or more, upon the social world as natural science has had on the material world? I think, in fact, that this view can be maintained — although, of course, no such comparison could be precise, in view of the very differences between what is involved in each case. The point is that reflection on social processes (theories, and observations about them) continually enter into, become disentangled with and re-enter the universe of events that they describe. No such phenomenon exists in the world of inanimate nature, which is indifferent to whatever human beings might claim to know about it. Consider, for example, theories of sovereignty formulated by seventeenth-century European thinkers. These were the results of reflection upon, and study of, social trends into which they in turn were fed back. It is impossible to have a modern sovereign state that does not incorporate a discursively articulated theory of the modern sovereign state. The marked tendency towards an expansion of political 'self-monitoring' on the part of the state is characteristic of modernity in the West in general, creating the social and intellectual climate from which specialized, 'professional' discourses of social science have developed but also both express and foster. One could certainly make some sort of case for claiming that these changes, in which social science has been centrally involved, are of a very fundamental character. By the side of them the transformations of nature achieved by the natural sciences do not look so massive.

Reflecting upon such considerations a little further, we can see

both why the social sciences may not appear to generate a great deal of original knowledge and also why theories and ideas produced in the past, apparently paradoxically, may retain a relevance to the present day which archaic conceptions of the natural sciences do not have. The best and most interesting ideas in the social sciences (a) participate in fostering the climate of opinion and the social processes which give rise to them, (b) are in greater or lesser degree entwined with theories-in-use which help to constitute those processes and (c) are thus unlikely to be clearly distinct from considered reflection which lay actors may bring to bear in so far as they discursively articulate, or improve upon, theories-in-use. These facts have consequences, particularly for sociology (to which they are most distinctly relevant) which affect both the prosecution of empirical research and the formulation and reception of theories. In respect of research they mean that it is much more difficult than is the case in natural science to 'hold up' acceptance of theories while searching for ways to test them out appropriately. Social life moves on; appealing or potentially practical theories, hypotheses or findings may be taken up in social life in such a way that the original grounds upon which they could be tested have altered anyway. There are many complex possible permutations of mutual 'feed-in' here, which combine also with the difficulties inherent in controlling variables, replicating observations and other methodological quandaries in which the social sciences can find themselves. Theories in natural science are original, innovative and so on to the degree to which they place in question what either lay actors or professional scientists previously believed about the objects or events to which they refer. But theories in the social sciences have to be in some part based upon ideas which (although not necessarily discursively formulated by them) are already held by the agents to whom they refer. Once reincorporated within action, their original quality may become lost; they may become all too familiar. The notion of sovereignty and associated theories of the state were stunningly new when first formulated; today they have in some degree become a part of the very social reality which they helped to establish.

But why do some social theories retain their freshness long after the conditions that helped produce them are past? Why, now that we are well familiar with the concept and the reality of

state sovereignty, do seventeenth-century theories of the state retain a relevance to social or political reflection today? Surely exactly because they have contributed to constituting the social world we now live in. It is the fact that they are reflections upon a social reality which they also help to constitute and which both has a distance from, yet remains part of, our social world that engages our attention. Theories in the natural sciences which have been replaced by others which do the same job better are of no interest to the current practice of science. This cannot be the case where those theories have helped to constitute what they interpret or explicate. The 'history of ideas' may perhaps justifiably be regarded as of marginal importance to the practising natural scientist, but it is much more than tangential to the social sciences.

If they are correct, these ruminations lead on in a direct way to a consideration of social science as critique — as involved in a practical fashion with social life. We cannot be content with the 'technological' version of critique proposed by the orthodox consensus, a view deriving from a natural science model. The technological view of critique supposes that the 'internal critique' of social science — the critical assessments which those working in the social sciences make of each other's views — uncomplicatedly generates an 'external critique' of lay beliefs that can be the basis of practical social intervention. But, given the significance of the 'double hermeneutic', matters are much more complex. The formulation of critical theory is not an *option*; theories and findings in the social sciences are likely to have practical (and political) consequences regardless of whether or not the sociological observer or policy-maker decides that they can be 'applied' to a given practical issue.

This was not a particularly easy book to write and proved in some part refractory to the normal ordering of chapters. Structuration theory was formulated in substantial part through its own 'internal critique' — the critical evaluation of a variety of currently competing schools of social thought. Rather than allow some of these critical confrontations to obtrude into the main sections of the text, I have included them as appendices to those chapters to which they most immediately relate. (Notes associated with them similarly follow the notes that belong to relevant chapters.) The

reader who wants to follow the main line of the argument in an unencumbered way can pass over them. They will, however, be of interest to anyone concerned either with how the views I defend differ from those of others or with the elaboration of themes treated in a condensed way in the core of each chapter. A variety of neologisms are used in the book, and I have placed a glossary of these at the end.

Reference

1 It would, of course, be a mistake to suppose that the influence of Parsons is confined to the past, to imagine that Parsons has been forgotten in the same way as he once suggested happened to Spencer very soon after his death. On the contrary, one of the most visible trends in social theory today is the prime part played by views drawn more or less directly from Parsons. One might instance the writings of Luhmann and Habermas in Germany, Bourricaud in France and Alexander and others in the United States. I do not intend to discuss any of this literature in detail, but it is probably worth spelling out a little why I do not have much sympathy with those aspects of the writings of such authors which are closely based on Parsons's ideas. All the writers in question are strongly critical of Parsons's connections with functionalism, of which Luhmann probably seeks to retain more than the others. In this respect, I am in accord with them, as this text should make clear enough. But in other ways, for reasons which are also documented at some length in this book, I consider that a radical break has to be made with Parsonian theorems. An important aspect of this concerns the filtering of the influence of Max Weber through the writings of Parsons. I have often been called a 'Weberian' by critics who regard this as some sort of irreparable fault. I do not see the term, as they do, as a slur, but neither do I accept it as accurately applied to my views. If I draw upon Weber, it is from an angle different from that of the aforementioned authors. Thus Habermas's Weber (surprisingly perhaps) tends to be a Parsonian-style Weber: concerned above all with the rationalization of values and with 'social differentiation', portrayed as generalized processes of development. Social life is not depicted here through the lenses I would prefer to borrow from Weber, as concerned with the multifarious practices and struggles of concretely located actors; with conflict and the clash of sectional interests; and with the territoriality and violence of political formations or states. Parsons regarded himself as an 'action theorist' and called his

version of social science the 'action frame of reference'. But, as I have sought to show at some length elsewhere (see *NRSM*, chapter 3), what I would regard as a satisfactory conception of action (and other related notions, especially those of intentions and reasons) is not to be found in Parsons's work. This is not, as some commentators have suggested, because a later emphasis upon functionalism and systems theory tended to swamp an earlier concern with 'voluntarism'. It is because the idea of voluntarism was flawed at source. In Parsons's thought voluntarism has always been linked with the resolution of the 'problem of order', conceived of by him as the coordination of potentially disruptive individual wills. It is resolved through the demonstration that actors internalize, as motives, the shared values upon which social cohesion depends. The call for an account of action becomes conflated with the demand to link a 'psychological' theory of motivation with a 'sociological' interpretation of the structural features of social systems. Little, if any, conceptual room is left for what I emphasize as the knowledgeability of social actors, as constitutive in part of social practices. I do not think that any standpoint which is heavily indebted to Parsons can cope satisfactorily with this issue at the very core of the concerns of social theory as I conceive of it in this book.

If those strongly indebted to Parsons today do not regard themselves as functionalists and have rejected the functionalist cast of Parsons's thought in greater or lesser degree, they still take over other ideas related to most versions of functionalism. These include: a fascination with 'value-consensus' or symbolic orders at the expense of the more mundane, practical aspects of social activity; the tendency to assume that societies are easily distinguishable entities, as biological organisms are; and a fondness for evolutionary-style theories. I consider each of these emphases to be seriously misleading and shall enter strong reservations about them. There can be no doubt about the sophistication and importance of the work of some authors currently endeavouring to develop Parsons's work in novel ways, particularly Luhmann and Habermas. But I think it as necessary to repudiate the newer versions of Parsonianism as I do the longer established varieties of non-Parsonian structural sociology.