
Chapter 7  Theory

by Richard Kilminster

Introduction

Much of what was reported in the two previous surveys to this one (Hall 1986; Outhwaite 1989) as being important contemporary trends in theory, has not been superseded. It would be very surprising if it had, given the short timescale of six years involved. My coverage gives more attention to developments in metatheory, which complements the first survey, which concentrated more on substantive theory. All three surveys together probably capture reasonably well the contours of theory in the present period.

Trends reported in the earlier surveys which seem to me to be continuing unabated into the 90s include: the return to comparative and historical substantive theory; the influence of new philosophies of science, in particular realism; the continuing interest in the classics; the widening of sociological scope to include a global dimension; and a growing trend towards an interdisciplinary approach to problems. To avoid repetition, I have not covered each of these trends in any depth, with the exception of the classics and realism. My treatment of realism is to regard it as a tendency, so I concentrate more on why this conception has become popular amongst sociologists at this time.

The trend towards a global orientation reported by Outhwaite is, in my view, counter-balanced by an opposite trend, whereby sociologists have been at the same time reducing the scope of their work in favour of its practical relevance to short-range problems of social policy or management. I go into this counter-movement in section 4(i). And I see less clear-cut paradigm identity in the present period in schools such as Marxism, critical theory, structuralism and the sociology of everyday life, than did Outhwaite. My view, explained at length below, is that although these schools do to some extent still practise as independent paradigm-communities, hangovers from the 'war of the schools' of the 70s, it is in a far less distinctive guise. Their characteristic concepts have already been absorbed into the common pool of sociological knowledge, in the
centripetal movement towards synthesis that I describe in detail in sections 3 and 4(v).

To produce an exhaustive inventory of every single paradigm or trend extant in the present period would, I think, be a sterile exercise. It would only amount to a long list. I have come up with a selection of what seem to me to be important themes and tendencies into which particular theories or approaches seem to fit. My choices are not entirely arbitrary, however, since the guiding principle for much of what I say is a sociological model of the three phases of post-War sociology. Theoretical solutions in the present period grew out of an agenda of problems bequeathed by the previous phases, each of which at the same time has a particular cast of its own. Unless we are aware of these successive phases, I do not think we can properly understand contemporary developments.

I also touch upon some theory and practice issues and try to clear up some misunderstandings about theory in sociology. The contemporary developments I focus upon are: the post-empiricist sensibility; the realist tendency; the perennial classics; and the twin strategies of pluralism and synthesis. Included is a discussion of the most prominent current example of synthesis, Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration. As will become obvious, I take a long-term view of contemporary developments.

1. The practice of theory

A lot of students of sociology are put off by theory because theoretical discussions often seem abstract, high-flown and obscure. Theorizing may also seem to be a pointless and luxurious activity when, as sociology also teaches us, social inequalities and outrageous injustices exist in the contemporary world, crying out for radical change. For some people, to work towards remedying these social ills takes priority. Theory, therefore, seems to be simply irrelevant because it does not change the world. This last point is, however, a value-judgement. It just places higher importance or value, as a matter of preference, on action which aims at trying to change society, i.e. on politics, rather than on theory.

People who slag off theory in this way have become, with the very best of intentions, overwhelmed by the felt imperative for political action in the here and now. I am not denigrating serious politics, but simply putting it in perspective. If you step back a little and look at the long history of human societies, the present phase of our society – real, important and immediate though its problems are to us – is but a blink of the eyes. It is not easy to visualise the social conflicts and struggles of the present in this way, but it is worth trying. Getting the balance right between how you feel society ought to be organized and your study of how it actually is, forms part of the challenge of doing sociology that Norbert Elias referred to as the tension between involvement and detachment (Elias 1987).

The value-judgement that politics is simply more important than theory, which is seen as ineffectual and can therefore be abandoned, is based on a misunderstanding of the relationship between theory and practice. Without sociological theory we would not have access to any systematic, interconnected knowledge of the features of society which we feel need to be changed, upon which to base our political action. We would have no reliable knowledge of the causes of, let us say, social inequality or gender relations, or unemployment, let alone any idea what sustains them, nor how they may be related to each other. (More on this in section 2 below.) Also, what if the theory upon which you are
basing your politics is wrong? This will surely affect your chances of success. After you had discovered the faults of the theory the hard way, through failure of your practice, you would need to go back to the theoretical drawing board, i.e. back to sociological theory.

Since sociology as theory is learned and passed on in the thinking and acting of many people across the generations and has a public life in educational institutions, libraries and audio and video vaults, then its practical effects are probably more considerable in the longer run than would at first appear. As the great German philosopher G. W.F. Hegel said a long time ago:

Theoretical work, as I am becoming more convinced every day, accomplishes more in the world than practical work; once the realm of ideas has been revolutionized, reality cannot hold out. (Letter to Niethammer, 28 October, 1808) (Kaufmann 1966:327)

That statement does of course overstate the effects of theoretical work compared with observable practical activity, but on one point, at least, Hegel was on the right track. He saw that you should not equate making a difference in the world solely with practical politics in the immediate situation. If you think about the theory/practice problem with a much longer timescale in mind than simply the last decade of Tbry rule, then it begins to look different. It just takes some detachment to see it.

People who write off theory on practical-political grounds, often also complain that theoretical writings are both abstract and difficult to understand. I have some sympathy with these misgivings, but would offer three mitigating observations:

1. When people complain about the abstract character of sociological theory, they often have in mind metatheory, that is theorizing about theories themselves, or other reflections which come into this broad category (see section 2 below). Quite a lot of sociological writings could be described as metatheory, in which no new empirical material is directly presented. This kind of work will indeed produce fairly abstract reflections remote, though not totally divorced from, empirical reality. This is in the nature of such an enterprise. This pursuit is, however, only one of the strings to the sociologist’s bow; and it is often not appreciated that metatheory has in fact surprising pay-offs for empirical research and politics (Ritzer 1991).

2. Sometimes the theoretical writings of sociologists who quote philosophers or use philosophical arguments, can become very obscure and hard going, which further reinforces the idea that theory is something difficult which only a few people can make head or tail of. It is often the philosophical concepts and reasoning which contribute to the obscurity, not necessarily the sociological concepts themselves (Kilminster, 1989; Mouzelis, 1991).

3. Nevertheless, I would agree that a lot of writings in sociological theory could still be more clearly expressed. But that is not a problem unique to sociological theory nor to sociology in general. Have you looked at a philosophy journal recently? Or a book on political theory?

2. What is a theory?

Contrary to expectations, the answer to this question is fairly simple. A theory is
an organizing framework of concepts, established by empirical evidence, which explains why society or some aspect of society works as it does. It also makes connections between aspects of society which would otherwise seem to be unconnected, thereby enabling us to organize a good deal of disparate empirical knowledge. Further, as Talcott Parsons, the prominent functionalist theoretician, pointed out, in doing this a theory 'reveals the gaps in our existing knowledge and their importance. It thus constitutes a crucially important guide to the direction of fruitful research' (Parsons, 1938: 89). That characterization is conventional and uncontroversial. In similar forms it is to be found in many sociology textbooks. It is a notion of theory which has been in constant use in the natural and human sciences since the 17th century.

We need theory because you cannot obtain either reliable or more complete knowledge about society just from your own hunches or prejudices, or those of friends, or even from simply taking a look. In those ways you will already be able to 'explain', to your own satisfaction anyway, a lot of social events and patterns. However, a theory enables sociologists to go beyond that understanding because it has been, or could further be, tested in a public manner against evidence by many other people as well as yourself. The theory therefore controls for the intrusion of your own or anyone else's prejudices into the observations.

Theories also enable you to test out whether what you can directly observe yourself from your own experience in your own corner of society, is part of a general pattern. This is because the theory will already be based on observations taken from many different angles of the social world, beyond your own experience, which it will already have connected up. Furthermore, the theory, which we take for granted as available in a sociology book, has been handed down to us. It is the result of the work of many, many sociologists who we never knew, in different places, over several generations. In stepping into the world of sociological theory we are stepping into a domain of culture which is the accumulated result of a long development. It is a tradition which exceeds the scope of the discoveries of one person, including ourselves. It is from this feature that its richness derives.

Rather than trying to elaborate a complex classification of types of theory, and for reasons that will become obvious later, I think that a simple two-fold classification adequately captures the shape of sociological theory in the present phase of its development.

(i) Substantive theory

This refers to theory which has a high empirical-theoretical density. It deals with groups of people in real social relations of power, authority and domination (Runciman 1989: 2–3) and is closely bound up with empirical research. It is work with a 'sense of social structure' (Hall, 1986: 153). It deals with substantive social realities of a large-scale kind, such as the development of societies and civilizations, the formation of states and revolutions. In substantive theory sociologists ask: How do societies differ? Why do they differ? In what ways are they the same, and why? How do societies develop? And in what direction?

The works of the classical tradition of Marx, Weber and Durkheim are this kind of theory, as are the later attempts directly to extend their work to embrace the contemporary world, using comparative and historical evidence. I have in mind here the works of writers such as Elias (1939) (1978 & 1982), Skocpol (1979), Mann (1986), and Hall (1986b). Even though it is dealing with very large scale problems
and complex historical evidence, substantive theory is often fairly simple in
structure, painting the broad canvas of institutional power in societies with bold
strokes. People working in substantive theory regard theories as simply
conceptual devices and strategies for comparative, empirical analysis. Unlike
practitioners of metatheory, they do not discuss and analyse theories for their
own sake, nor do they bother very much with issues to do with the status of their
research or the validity of the knowledge they produce.

(ii) Metatheory

This refers to theory which has a lower empirical-theoretical density. Metatheory poses questions like, What is sociology? Can it be a science? How
should it proceed? How is theory related to practice? How does sociology relate
to everyday understanding? What are the links between face-to-face interaction
and wider social networks? Metatheoretical discussions evaluate the various
attempts to construct a theoretical language appropriate to explaining social
reality. As well as self-styled works of metatheorizing (Ritzer 1991) into this broad
category also fall all types of theorizing about theories; attempts to synthesise
concepts from various traditions; generalised discussions about the moral and
political implications of sociology and its relationship to other disciplines; and
manifestos and programmatic statements calling for the reorientation of
sociology, which periodically appear. The article you are reading now is a piece
of metatheory. In this kind of theory the connection to empirical, social-structural
realities, though not entirely absent, is much more tenuous (Giddens 1984;
Alexander 1987; Becker and Bryant 1989 and many more).

The point about varying degrees of empirical-theoretical density is another
way of saying that, despite appearances, all sociological books are alloys of
theory and data, but that the balance of the blend is tilted more one way or the
other in given cases. It is therefore a mistake to imagine that theoretical and
empirical sociology are dealing with two different objects. No sociological
knowledge is purely empirical, or purely theoretical. Even the most apparently
concrete textbook descriptions of, for example, social class, social movements,
youth culture or gender relations, are shot through with concepts and theoretical
assumptions which link the descriptions to wider social processes. And
conversely (except perhaps in the few cases where theories have been
expressed in mathematical symbols) no theoretical discussions are entirely
devoid of empirical content or reference. Even in metatheory we can recognise
the patterns of social life in the real human world that the theories or reflections
are referring to. If we could not, then metatheory would make no sense to us.

Occasionally I use the term paradigm in this article and it is useful to know what
this key term means because it comes up a lot in sociological theory. It derives
from Thomas Kuhn (1962) via a little known German medical scientist and
sociologist of science from the 1930s called Ludwig Fleck (Baladimas, 1977). My
own definition of this term for present purposes is: a self-contained, general
framework of concepts and theories informing the on-going research
characteristic of a community of school of sociologists. Examples of paradigms in
sociology are functionalism, Marxism, symbolic interactionism, ethno-
methodology or figurational sociology.

Before discussing a selection of the main developments in the contemporary
phase of sociological theory in section 4, I will briefly expound in the next section
a three-phase model of theory development since 1945. It is necessary to know a
little about these phases because the dominant trends in sociological theory of the present did not fall from the skies. The perceived problems and preoccupations of theory in the present will not make much sense unless you can see that they have arisen directly out of an agenda of problems set in the previous phases. The three-phase model is adapted from the pioneering work of Karl Mannheim on the sociology of cultural change (1928) (1952). I have gone back only to 1945, which is a very recent cut-off point, chosen only for the manageable presentation of the material and the desire to illuminate the present phase most vividly. The dates I have assigned are only approximate benchmarks. The phases overlap with each other, although each one does have a particular character of its own.

3. The three phases of post-War sociology

(i) Monopoly phase: circa 1945–65

In British and American sociology approximately during these years there was the domination of the paradigm of structural-functionalism deriving from Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. Other general frameworks of theory, such as symbolic interactionism and Marxism, did exist, but this one dominated in the academic establishments of Britain and the USA. It was also a period of American economic, military and cultural domination of Europe, as well as the superpower confrontation between West and East known as the Cold War. During this period, Anglo-American sociology apparently came as close as it has ever come to achieving the status of a one-paradigm science (Friedrichs, 1970: 23).

As every student of sociology knows, or will soon come to know, functionalism in its most sophisticated, Parsonsian, form, stressed that society, as a social system of interrelated parts, survived because it evolved institutional structures to fulfil the basic needs of the system, its 'functional pre-requisites'. In focusing on social order, integration and the stability of the system achieved via people internalizing commonly held values, functionalism had a deserved reputation for providing an essentially harmonious, stabilizing model of the whole society.

This paradigm is referred to by Anthony Giddens as the 'orthodox consensus' (Giddens 1984: xv) and became the point of departure for a deluge of criticisms from all sides in the next – conflict – phase of sociology. The steady decline of functionalism during that phase was precipitated not just by intelligent intellectual criticisms, important though they were (Cohen, 1966) but also by generational changes and other events in the world. The self-styled 'conflict' theorists of the time (Dahrendorf 1959; Coser 1956; Mills 1956; Rex 1961) had already begun to elaborate a critique and an alternative to American functionalism, based in European traditions of the sociology of power, by the time the 60s were under way. These theories then seemed to make more sense of the political polarization and violence within the USA and in Europe in that decade than the consensual-equilibrating model of society found in the dominant functionalist paradigm. The basic opposition between conflict and consensus theories that we routinely refer to today, dates from here.

The Parsonian theory of socialization was also assailed. Writers claimed in various ways that it implied a model of human beings as conforming and approval seeking, which left out of account the anxiety with which the most conformist of people are wracked (Wrong 1961). Others thought that the idea that social order was simply accomplished through people internalizing common values from a central pool of values was misleading, wrongly implying that people did this
learning in a mechanical way. The theory effectively demoted human beings to the status of a mere reflex of the social system (Dawe 1970). In the American ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel’s memorable description, Parsons’s theory of socialization assumed that people were ‘judgemental dopes’. (Had Garfinkel been writing in the 90s in Britain he might have talked of ‘judgemental wallies’ or perhaps ‘judgemental plonkers’.) It is true to say that the Parsons/anti-Parsons confrontation set the problem agenda for many years in the first two phases (Alexander 1987: 374).

All the criticisms of Parsons mentioned in the previous paragraph were in my view connected, in ways that are not well understood, with the ‘expressive’ experiments in social behaviour, politics and sexual codes by the generation of young people of the 1960s. The Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters has described these changes as forming part of a general process of informalization in various departments of social life, which intensified in that period (Wouters, 1986). For the record, today some Parsonians have reassessed the deluge of criticisms which rained down on his work and found many of them to be misguided, invalid or based on misunderstandings of what Parsons was trying to do (Münch 1987 & 1988; see also Kilminster 1989b). But there is no space to follow this up here.


This was a period of considerable ferment and conflict in sociology, during which rival paradigms or schools (such as Althusserian Marxism, critical theory, structuralism, feminism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, ‘Theorizing’, existential sociology) competed fiercely to be heard in the sociological marketplace. The older paradigm continued, but was beleaguered by the high profile ‘war of the schools’, in Bryant’s phrase (1989). During the 70s, at the height of this search for alternatives to the orthodox consensus, factions flourished in British sociology and many manifestos appeared announcing sundry ‘new directions’ for the reorientation of sociology (Filmer et al 1972; Pelz 1974). And for many sociologists, their searches and questionings took them into the arcane works of European philosophers such as Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Sartre and many more, which enriched sociology at this time.

In this phase, many sociologists expressed doubts about previously hallowed principles regarding knowledge, truth and the basics of social science and relativism became the order of the day. It is was a subject that troubled many people at the time (Luke 1977). In section 4(iii), I will explain the consequences of the fact that many of these rival paradigms had a cognitive emphasis. Here it is important to note that many also placed a strong stress on everyday life and the skills of the ordinary, lay actor in giving their activities meaning, just as the symbolic interactionist paradigm had always done in a different way in the previous phase. The grouping together in contemporary sociology of all these sociologies of everyday life as ‘micro’ approaches, as ‘interactionism’ or in some such category, is a hangover from this phase.

It was a period of considerable diversity, strife and theoretical disarray, which one writer at the time described as ‘sheer chaos, everything up for grabs’ (Bernstein 1976:xii). Debates in this period were often heated and frequently expressed in highly polarized either/or alternatives: Marxism versus sociology; positivism versus hermeneutics; humanist versus structuralist Marxism; ethnomethodology versus orthodox sociology; feminist theory versus malestream sociology; and so on.
Current sociologists are divided in their views about this extraordinary period in
the development of British sociology. John Hall, for example, in the 1986 version of
this survey, was particularly scathing about the work done in metatheory at this
time, dismissing much of it as "idealism" and as constituting a wrong turn, or a
diversion, in the development of sociology from the path of the classics of Marx,
Weber and Durkheim. A similar scepticism has been expressed by Mouzelis
(1991) on slightly different grounds. Whereas William Outhwaite, in the 1989
theory survey, takes a more charitable view, regarding the "great outpouring of
theoretical and programmatic works" (1989: 3) in this period as symptomatic of a
healthy and fundamental re-thinking of the model of scientific activity generally
accepted and followed by sociologists. Giddens (1984) is in broad agreement
with that judgement and openly acknowledges what he has learned from that
outpouring. One view takes a hard-line position, whilst the other is more liberal.
Rather than rushing to a judgement either pro or anti, I am more interested in
explaining why these conflicts occurred and then assessing the legacy of
reformulated problems that they left for the present stage.

(iii) Concentration phase: circa 1980–present

In this period the ferocity of the debates has subsided and the competing
schools have begun to concede ground to each other, instead of claiming that
they each possess the only valid paradigm. I have called this stage the
"concentration" phase because during it debates begin to concentrate around
certain important dichotomies. For example, the issues of structure/agency,
cause/meaning, realism/constructivism, or macro/micro social levels are
prominent today (Alexander, Gieson, et al., 1987; Giddens 1984; Outhwaite 1987
and many more). These bold and simple dualisms are also concentrated in the
sense of being highly synthetic. That is, they have embedded within them traces
of their origin in various forms in one or other of the competing schools in the
highly differentiated and diverse conflict phase. For example, if you take the
right hand side of the pairings, you can see condensed in agency, meaning,
constructivism and micro level, traces of the various "meaning sociologies" which
were in battle with the orthodox consensus. Traces of the latter, as well as the
classics of sociology, can be detected in the other halves of the oppositions:
structure, cause, realism, macro level.

Nowadays, people are searching more for sociological common ground
between themselves and others with whom they are in debate or dispute, not so
much trying to convince the other person of the value of their own paradigm. You
hear more talk now of how opposing positions can be made compatible. A
process of greater "mutual identification" between antagonists has taken place
(Mennell 1989: 138, quoting Elias). We have now come to a stage where
theoretical synthesis is once again in the air (Alexander 1987; Collins 1985;
Sanderson 1987; Giddens 1984; Münch 1987).

One important symptom of incipient synthesis in the present period is that
concepts which, in the conflict phase, were the subject of strife and rabid
controversy, have now become common property. A tangible manifestation of
this trend is the appearance of a number of sociological dictionaries in the
present period to codify sociological concepts for everyone in the discipline,
their paradigm origins left aside (Hoult, 1980; Mann 1983, reprinted 1989;
Abercrombie, et al. 1984, second edition 1988; Jary and Jary 1991). In these books,
concepts which people fought tooth and nail to establish as explanatory and
important in the conflict phase, now appear side by side with concepts from the
earlier functionalist 'orthodox consensus', such as system, norm, value, social control, deviance, socialization, role and belief system.

Here is a list of concepts which, during the concentration phase, have imperceptibly made the transition into the sociological canon and taken their place alongside the older ones: indexicality, typifications, meaning, lifeworld (from the 'meaning sociologies'); mode of production, alienation, hegemony, praxis, labour power (from Marxism); patriarchy, motherhood, gender, domestic labour (from feminism); discourse, essentialism, synchrony/diachrony, code, sign/signified, deconstruction, social practices (from structuralism and post-structuralism).

I am aware that, in various hues, paradigm-communities such as ethnomethodology, Marxism and feminism still exist as research traditions and still to some degree compete with general sociology, even though many of their characteristic concepts and insights have already been absorbed into the general sociological pool of knowledge. The trend towards synthesis is part of a two-sided movement. At the present time the centripetal tendency towards synthesis just has the upper hand over the centrifugal movement towards fragmentation. In the previous - conflict - phase the balance was tipped the other way. It could of course shift back again, initiating a new period of intense fragmentation. The interesting question is: what social forces might precipitate such a process?

4. The current condition of theory: themes and tendencies

(i) From scope to relevance

Within both substantive theory and metatheory it has always been possible to some degree to separate out the theoretical and empirical elements as relatively autonomous levels in the on-going enterprise of sociology. But in the current period in sociology and adjacent subject areas, the theoretical and the empirical sides have become separated in a rather exaggerated way. In the last few years the stark polarity of theoretical versus empirical sociology has again become prominent, in a way comparable with a similar separation which occurred in the 1930s in American sociology (Parsons 1938) though for different reasons.

It is important that we understand this feature of the present context when we are looking at current developments in theory. Today, in the British case anyway, a strong value preference has become associated with the empirical side, with the result that many theoretical activities which were always the basic stuff at sociology - including even substantive theory itself - have now become denigrated as 'mere theory'. And sociological theoreticians as a whole have become stigmatized in a way that contrasts strikingly with the prestige associated with, say, being a theoretical physicist or a cosmologist. For example, just think of the high esteem in which people hold Stephen Hawking.

How has this situation come about? In the development of sociology the status of sociological theory, as such, in relation to other departments of the discipline, changes. This is partly as sociologists respond, rightly or wrongly, to pressures coming from outside the discipline in the wider society. At the present time, it has a lower status than, say, doing empirical research or research methodology. But it had a much higher status in the conflict phase when sociologists in Britain began to read more and more Continental philosophy and Western Marxist thought and
discussions of profound questions about the historical condition of humankind and the problem of truth had a higher profile than today. And in the monopoly phase, sociologists who had mastered the complex and abstract functionalist theory of society of Talcott Parsons were regarded with considerable awe and respect.

During the 1980s and up to the present time, however, sociologists in Britain (and to differing degrees in other Western countries too) have been put under pressure by external government funding agencies and by their own institutions, to justify their activity from the point of view of its direct policy usefulness, cost effectiveness and/or potential value as a means of raising funds. As a result, sociologists, who were not under this kind of pressure to the same degree in the earlier phases, have responded in two ways. On the one hand, they have played up the more empirical part of what they can do which does have direct relevance for social policy or which can be sold to firms and other organizations. On the other hand, they have down-played their pure research into basic social processes and sociological questions chosen for their inherent scientific interest. To use the formulation of Johan Goudsblom (1977) in recent years sociologists as a group have sought to increase the practical relevance of their work at the expense of its scope.

The classical legacy of sociology, associated with Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Elias and others has, however, provided us with sociological problems of very wide scope, including the nature of social integration; social identity; social morality; personality formation; knowledge and religious belief; long range social development; truth and ideology; the fate of modernity and much more. Looked at in the longer run, mighty questions such as those have always formed the basic stuff of sociology. But in the current climate, with the demand for policy relevant empirical research more and more to the fore, the pursuit of these basic sociological questions, although continuing, appears to many people now to be the irrelevant pursuit of mere 'theory' or speculation or as abstract philosophizing: hence its practitioners are stigmatized. Wardell and Turner (1986: 1–17) refer to this trend as the 'dissolution of the classical project', though I feel this pessimism is rather premature. Sociology in the grand manner has not dissolved, rather it has just taken on a lower profile in the discipline, for the reasons stated above.

Historically, however, the main claim of European sociology as a legitimate scientific pursuit never ever rested solely on its ability to amass facts; nor on its sophisticated methodology; nor on its direct relevance to social policy; nor on its usefulness to business firms. There have been some advocates of these pursuits as a justification for sociology around inside and outside the discipline for many years. But it is only in the 1980s that these ideas, in various combinations, have become prominent. This is not to say that they are unimportant or illegitimate as possible tasks, amongst others, for sociologists. It is just that viewed in the long-term they have neither singly nor together by any means formed sociology's central rationale.

I think that sociology's claim to a secure place in the sciences and the humanities in the 19th and 20th centuries can be briefly described for present purposes under four broad headings:

(i) Its claim to an independent, emergent subject-matter of its own which people had already begun to call 'society'. This social 'level of integration' (Elias 1987) was a reality sui generis and not reducible to those levels investigated by experimental psychology, biology or economics (Frisby & Sayer 1986).
(ii) The detachment from the transitory political and other pressures of the day that sociologists have been able to achieve and sustain in institutions of teaching, learning and research to enable them to investigate the social level in a sustained and realistic way (Elias 1987; Shils 1970). (NB: The possibility of achieving greater detachment is not identical with the spurious claim to value-freedom.)

(iii) The ambitious scope of its research programme, which included social regularities and questions of a long-range character, such as the developmental tendency of society, changes in social consciousness and the nature of social integration. Within sociology’s wide scope also fell the development of a wholly new treatment of the problem of the human individual, previously discussed in forms of individualistic psychology or philosophy. Sociology carried forward this focus as the problem of the social formation of personality and identity (Burkitt 1991).

(iv) The capacity to take on board and to transform into sociological problems, such evaluative and moral issues as freedom, self-fulfilment, democracy, equality and emancipation, previously monopolised by philosophers, theologians or representatives of various ideologies (Kilminster 1989; Bryant 1992).

In the present period, the work of the German social philosopher and neo-Marxist, Jürgen Habermas, has attracted attention for its attempt to define more clearly sociology’s capacity for social criticism that I mentioned in (iv) above. He has worked out complex philosophical arguments to try to prove that although a free, equal and democratic society has never existed anywhere in human history, it is not just a pipe-dream. It is, he claims, an objective possibility still worth working towards. For him, and for sociologists influenced by his work (Thompson 1984; McCarthy 1978; Bauman 1976) sociology should take the form of ‘critical theory’, which selects its topics for empirical investigation or theoretical discussion always with this idea of a free, equal and democratic society in mind.

Habermas’s voluminous works span all three phases of sociology that I outlined and he is continually moving in new directions in his quest. His most recent massive two-volume study The Theory of Communicative Action defies easy summary, but concerns, amongst other things, the apparent encroachment into people’s everyday ‘lifeworld’ of types of administrative and technical interaction from the political and economic systems (Habermas 1981; 1987). Considerable controversy surrounds his work (Thompson & Held 1982; White 1988; Mouzelis 1991).

(ii) The post-empiricist sensibility

The role of theory in sociological research as the controller of empirical observations has not in my view changed very much since the beginnings of social science. But what has changed in the 1980s is that sociologists, particularly those who take their lead in these matters from philosophers of science, have come to accept a looser, more flexible view of what a theory is and how it can be tested. They have also learned to live with a less idealised picture of science than the one dominant prior to the 70s. In the monopoly phase in particular, science was widely regarded as the principled and unproblematic pursuit of truth, its content unaffected significantly by social power. Few sociologists now see it that way.

In the 50s and 60s many sociologists sought to legitimate their work through embracing a model of scientific activity based on various versions of the then
influential philosophical doctrines of empiricism and positivism. The positivistic idea was that all sciences should follow one method of investigation and explanation. These philosophies provided a very formal model of a theory to be employed in either natural or social science. It was to consist of a rigorous set of concepts and generalizations from which one deduced, in a very strict and logical way, a number of hypotheses and predictions for empirical testing. Sometimes theories would be set out in propositional form, i.e. using logical symbols or closely argued statements or a combination of them. The hypotheses could then be verified (or, as the philosopher Karl Popper insisted, falsified) on the basis of data derived largely from empirical observation. The aim was to develop sociological laws in the same way that natural scientists have developed, say, the laws of physics or chemistry.

At about the same time as the sociologists' conflict phase, philosophers of science were also caught up in intense debates about older orthodoxies. In the ferment of the debates on the subject during the 70s and early 80s, science was shown to be much more dogmatic and closed than the empiricist-positivist picture would have had us believe. Influential writers who contributed to this realization include Thomas Kuhn (1962), Imre Lakatos (1976) and Mary Hesse (1980). Also, the rigorous deductive model of theory and empirical testing fell out of favour as a usable device. One problem was that it was very difficult to detach the theory from the data. It was hard to know whether the empirical data you were using to test the theory had not been discovered by you simply because those data were permeated by the theory in the first place. And the whole research process involved a good deal of interpretation and reinterpretation of data by scientists. This was the discovery of a 'hermeneutic' dimension in all sciences.

The definitive, once-and-for-all, certain verification or falsification of theories thus proved to be a much more circular and rather messy business than the old scientific model suggested. This realization that even the natural sciences did not work like the positivist-empiricist ideal specified, was at first liberating for sociologists. They could now say, with some backing, that the natural sciences were indeed as ramshackle and indeterminate as people were always saying their own sociological science was.

Today many sociological theorists are taking their lead from these kinds of conclusions and many have come to accept some version of what is often called a 'post-empiricist' or sometimes a 'post-positivist' view of sociological theory or of the sociological enterprise in general (Bryant 1989; Alexander 1987). To state the obvious, this viewpoint is so called because it articulates an outlook on science which became inevitable after empiricism and positivism had been discredited. The main features of post-empiricism have been characterized succinctly by Giddens and Turner (1987: 2):

Summarizing the newer conception boldly, the idea that there can be theory-neutral observations is repudiated, while systems of deductively-linked laws are no longer canonized as the highest ideal of scientific explanation. Most importantly, science is presumed to be an interpretative endeavour, such that problems of meaning, communication and translation are immediately relevant to scientific theories.

Very few sociologists would today recommend for the discipline the older model of the deduction of hypotheses from theory in a formal and rigorous manner. A number of writers have simultaneously discovered the conception of theory advocated by the American symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer (1969).
He referred to systems of concepts as provisional ‘sensitizing’ devices, which help us in framing research problems and interpreting results (Giddens 1984: 326; Bryant 1989: 323; Turner 1987: 163; Outhwaite 1989: 168). This principle seems to capture the lower degree of theoretical formality generally expected in the current period. There are, however, still positivist sympathisers in the discipline (Turner 1987) and others who call for more deductive rigour and a propositional framework in theory, very much in the older spirit, albeit in a modified form (Abell 1989).

It would be a mistake to imagine that every sociologist in the present period who is operating with a ‘sensitizing’ view of theory, or a more flexible model of what constitutes a theory, or a less idealized view of natural science, has been inspired by the new philosophies of science. Some have reached similar conclusions or have worked with non-positivist assumptions for many years based, say, on a reading of writers in the classical tradition or perhaps Norbert Elias (Elias and Dunning 1986), or Pierre Bourdieu (1990). In other words, sociologists too, as well as philosophers, have also rejected the positivist-empiricist model of theory testing and explanation as inapplicable to the nature of the connections observable in the social world, in some cases a long time ago (Elias 1955 (1987); Mannheim 1925; Parsons 1938).

For those sociologists for whom acceptance of the older empiricist-positivist viewpoint as a foundation for their activity provided a measure of professional certitude, its intellectual demise in recent years has generated anxiety. The very foundations of their discipline as a science have seemed in question. This is partly why realism (next section) has had so much appeal. Without the positivist model, however, which still constitutes a common understanding of science outside the academy, it is more difficult to maintain a credible public ‘scientific’ face for sociology. Other scientists in the human arena, such as economists or psychologists, do not have this particular problem, because they have cultivated over many years exactly the highly quantitative, statistical and rigorous method which, in the public mind, is still synonymous with science.

(iii) The realist tendency

In the previous edition of this survey, in 1986, William Outhwaite, one of the main advocates of realist metatheory in recent years, offered a brief summary of the philosophical aspects and documented the considerable number of sociologists in Britain who are champions of realism. I will not repeat these points here. So prominent is the realist tendency that it is almost becoming legitimate to call it a social movement. There is now an annual standing conference on realism into its seventh year, which discusses the relevance of the perspective to different fields and problems. Let us look at realism and think about why it has become popular in sociology in recent years. First of all, though, what is realism?

The basic drift of realism is that the social and natural realms are real, exist independently of us and have a structure of their own, which sciences attempt to describe and explain. Unlike the positivists and empiricists, the realists claim that what we directly observe in both nature and in society is generated by hidden mechanisms which we cannot observe, but which scientists infer from observations and theoretical work. This view is opposed to forms of constructivism which state that scientific theories are simply constructions or fictions (Watzlawick 1979; 1984; Speed 1991).

Books which expound realist ideas - particularly the philosophical ones - are
often difficult to understand because they are written in a complex and unfamiliar philosophical language, derived partly from the German philosopher Kant and partly from various contemporary philosophers of science. The discussions often involve what philosophers call 'transcendental' arguments, which aim to establish the conditions of existence of some thing or activity, in this case science. Sometimes these conditions are called 'presuppositions'. Hence, Roy Bhaskar, the leading realist philosopher in the current period, argues that the existence of real objects or structures in the social or natural worlds is one of the conditions of existence, or presuppositions, for scientific activity. If scientists did not assume this, he argues, the practice of science would be impossible (Bhaskar 1979).

As a doctrine within the branch of philosophy called metaphysics, realism has in fact existed in various forms since at least the Medieval period, when it was opposed to nominalism, which is an older term meaning roughly constructivism. Within the social sciences, realist models of scientific specialization and development have been produced before (Needham 1942; Elias 1956 (1987)). Norbert Elias's work in this area is of particular interest. He produced a broadly realist theory of the sciences and their objects over thirty years before the current discussions. His work is realist insofar as he posits inherent structures in the real world which are independent of us, but his model dispenses entirely with any transcendental-philosophical discussion or terminology. Indeed, it was elaborated without any philosophical foundation at all.

Most sociologists who have gone over to realism perceive themselves as having done so because they have been rationally or intellectually convinced by the arguments offered in support of it. I have no doubt that this is so (Pawson 1989; Outhwaite 1987). But that is not the whole story. There are extra-theoretical reasons for the appeal of realism today. In this philosophical metatheory many sociologists have gratefully discovered a new and respectable legitimation for sociology as a science to fill the vacuum of uncertainty left by the fall of positivism-empiricism. Contemporary realists say that once we jettison the positivist-empiricist picture of science and adopt the realist conception, we can see that the differences between the natural and the social sciences are not so great as they once seemed. Realism firmly reestablishes sociology as a science alongside the natural sciences, apparently clearing away many of the fundamental doubts about this very possibility which were thrown at the sociology establishment during the conflict phase. It is a doctrine which has an obvious appeal to sociologists at this stage as part of a professional ideology.

The career of realism in recent years is further illuminated if we bear in mind two prominent features of many of the schools and paradigms in the conflict phase. Many, if not all, of the competing schools, for example, phenomenology, ethnmethodology, structuralism, critical theory and structuralist Marxism, were, in various ways, 'cognitivist', or anyway they leaned heavily in this direction. And many were also 'constructivist'. These terms refer, respectively, to an emphasis on the role of knowledge in human activity and an assumption that theories or concepts are merely fictions or constructions through which groups organize an otherwise chaotic world. Generally, the model of human beings implied in these paradigms was one which stressed the role of the mind and categories of thought, or the centrality of consciousness in general.

Realism came on the scene in the 70s, initially as a counterblast to all the cognitivism and constructivism. It stressed real structures, natural and social, existing independently of us, of which we form a part, which linked realism with materialism. It was this feature which made it attractive to Marxists, or people sympathetic to their viewpoint, who indeed formed many of the early advocates.
For them, realism provided a much needed corrective to the stress on consciousness and on knowledge processes in the more cognitively biased paradigms. Further, it could be made compatible with Marx’s model of the capitalist mode of production. It enabled sociologists more easily to put back on the agenda questions of power, domination and exploitation based in the real social structure.

In the 80s and until now, realism has attracted more and more adherents, following those beginnings. But in recent years the reasons for the sociologists’ continuing conversion to realism have changed somewhat. In the present context, as I said in section 4(i), they are being asked more and more to narrow the scope of their work and to provide policy relevant, immediately practical knowledge. Interestingly, it is the way in which realism can apparently provide counter-arguments to defeat the extreme relativistic consequences of constructivism that has endeared it to many sociologists with that policy aim in view. How is this so?

Because constructivists said that theories were fictions, it was a short step for its advocates to pronounce a state of ‘anything goes’ in theory, whereby any arbitrary theoretical construct was deemed to be as good as any other. Radical constructivism said you could not appeal to an object independent of your constructs to settle a dispute between rival constructs because your observations of this object could not be made independently of either construct. Realism, however, puts back on the agenda real structures independent of our theories, so points to the way out of this problem.

Consequently, realism opened the door to the production once again of reliable sociological knowledge. We could once more legitimately pursue a science of society, even on the lines of the natural sciences, but without the twin stigmas of positivism and empiricism. Realism was a post-empiricist counter-current apparently offering more rigour than the flexible, looser view of the role of theory associated with the post-empiricist sensibility in general. The heady possibility of taking our place once again amongst the scientists – something regarded as decidedly questionable in the paradigm anarchy of the conflict phase – appealed to many sociologists very much. In realism, too, their chronic status anxieties about their place in the social and natural sciences, were assuaged. At the same time, it dovetailed nicely into one of their new self-images as suppliers of relevant empirical knowledge for practical or policy purposes. And it could be made compatible with Marx! It was a winner.

(iv) The perennial classics

In contemporary consumer societies such as our own, there is a pronounced ‘cult of the new’, whereby only the very latest style or fashion in culture or goods is regarded as vital or significant. Everyone wants to be bang up to date, in order to keep up with the Jones’s. Styles and fads date very quickly. This attitude can spill over into sociology, encouraging people to pursue the very latest books which, of course, as commodities, are published, attractively packaged, at an enormous rate year by year. For the sociologist, keeping up with all these new books, even in one or two fields, is a breathless activity.

We have to get this pursuit in perspective in sociology because it encourages the fallacious view that it can only be the most very recent books that contain the key insights. If a book is old, then it surely cannot have anything to say simply because it is old. But, simply because a book has just been published, and represents literally the most up to date discussion of a topic, does not mean that it has necessarily taken the problem or issue concerned much or any further than,
say, a work published fifty years ago. Indeed, it might have confused the issue. Fashionable books and authors rise and fall all the time, particularly in adjacent fields such as social philosophy and cultural studies. The sociologist needs to exercise sceptical restraint with regard to this phenomenon in order not to get carried away with the latest trend or style in theory, which may not represent an advance. *We have to think very carefully about what we mean when we say that a book in sociology is 'out of date'.*

Those introductory remarks provide a cautionary backdrop for the topic of the status of the sociological classics in this period. There is a good deal of debate in contemporary sociological theory about the relevance and usefulness of the works of the classical writers such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel (Rhea, 1981; Alexander, 1987b; Anderson, Hughes & Sharrock 1987). My reading of the present situation is that those who assert that the classics have all been proved wrong have very much lost the argument. A more common view is that classic texts such as *Capital, Suicide, The Protestant Ethic, Ideology and Utopia* or *The Civilizing Process* have a privileged status because they established fundamental problems or ways of working useable beyond their own contexts. They are works that set a fundamental standard. To affirm this status for the classics does not, however, endue them with a timeless validity. I will return to this point at the end of this section.

There is a distinct willingness in recent theory to return to the classics for inspiration and to build on them in the light of contemporary developments in the world, which I mentioned when discussing substantive theory earlier. The field of comparative-historical sociology is replete with works which are collectively known by their 'neo' prefix, say neo-Marxism (Anderson 1979 & 1979b; Wright 1985) or neo Weberianism (Collins 1986). Others have returned to Durkheim as the inspiration for reflections on sociological method (Gane 1988) and a new translation of the *Division of Labour* appeared in 1984. An entire reader has been devoted to discussing the contemporary relevance of Max Weber’s essay 'Science as a Vocation' (Lassman, Velody & Martins 1989) which is only the tip of the iceberg of the Weber revival in general (Outhwaite 1989). A special edition of the influential journal *Theory, Culture and Society* (1991) was devoted entirely to the work of Georg Simmel, on the grounds that his analyses of the modern urban experience are unsurpassed and vitally relevant today.

One contemporary writer who has provided an extensive justification for the continuing centrality of the classics is Jeffrey Alexander (1987b). He suggests that the 'post-positivist' or 'post-empiricist' sensibility gives us a different attitude towards them. At one time, in the monopoly phase, writers such as R. K. Merton (1968) thought that we could, like the practising natural scientist, ignore the history of our theories and the contexts of their authors, and simply summarise the yield of concepts and theories we find in their works and get on with testing them.

Nowadays, however, we have come to realise that even if we did that, testing the theories derived is not straightforward. It is shot through with non-empirical background assumptions, presuppositions and ideological evaluations, of which sociologists are hardly even aware. These assumptions induce them to test theories in a variety of different ways which pre-empt the evidence they will regard as decisive.

The existence of these varying non-empirical dimensions inevitably gives rise to disagreements between sociologists, which he maintains are endemic to the discipline and need to be teased out theoretically. Since fundamental disagreement is inevitable, then a dimension of institutionalised discourse, or
dialogue, between researchers becomes central to the enterprise in order to ensure the production of more reliable knowledge. For Alexander, the chronic state of dispute in sociology gives the classics an essential role as a point of reference:

Because disagreement is so rife in social science, serious problems of mutual understanding arise. Without some baseline of minimal understanding, however, communication is impossible. For disagreement to be possible in a coherent, ongoing and consistent way, there must be some basis for a cultural relationship.... This is where the classics come in.... To mutually acknowledge a classic is to have a common point of reference. A classic reduces complexity. It is a symbol which condenses - 'stands for' - a range of diverse general commitments. (1987:27)

Notice, though, that he assumes as a matter of course that disagreement is always rife in sociology as a social science, without reflecting that it may simply be the aftermath of a particular conflictual phase in its development, when schools competed with each other, that produces the illusion that disagreement is endemic in sociology. As we saw in the three-phase model of post-War sociology earlier, however, the theoretical movements towards fragmentation and integration go hand in hand in sociology, with social developments favouring one or other of them. (More on this in the next section.)

To conclude this section, the issue of the role of the classics is a debate which has some surprising turns and goes to the heart of the question of the scientific status of sociology. In the current period, under the influence of the post-empiricist attitude, their perceived importance in sociological theory has increased rather than decreased. Those who want to demote the classics in favour solely of contemporary explorations or theories, are often positivists or positivist sympathisers, who believe that the relevant bits of theory in the classics should be stated formally and separately from their sociogenesis and then tested. The idea that a mature science should progressively try to shed its founders and big names in this way is a characteristically positivistic stance.

There are also those who apparently believe that the classics have been superseded cognitively, that is they are now 'out of date' because their concepts are no longer explanatory for contemporary events or processes in the social world, or that their methodological reflections have been superseded by contemporary commentators. To establish such positions would take a lot of theoretical-empirical work and I am not convinced that all the people who assert this view as a matter of principle, have done it. More often than not I suspect that they reject the classics because they see them as 'out of date' in the other sense of simply being old books.

To claim that the classics are truly cognitively 'out of date', however, assumes that social processes have changed sufficiently radically or completely since their respective periods, such as to render their concepts, theories, problems and methods more-or-less irrelevant as tools for understanding the contemporary world or social science. But this is surely unlikely, given the short timescale involved. This issue comes down again to the longer view of theory and practice. Arguably, what partly determines the survival value of the classics is the fact that the real processes and problems of society and social science that they investigated still exist today, albeit in modified forms. One reason we return to Marx is that there is still class struggle, even though its form has changed. One
reason we return to Durkheim is that the problem of solidarity in an individualistic society is still an issue for us. One reason we return to Weber is that power relations continue to proliferate on many other dimensions than the economic. One reason we return to Simmel is that his analysis of the experience of social life in the metropolitan settings of the modern money economy still speaks to our present condition.

There is a profound issued involved here. As Baldamus (1992) pointed out, the rate of obsolescence of cognitive achievements in sociology is very slow because of the slow process of development of social change that those concepts and theories stem from and are at the same time explaining. This is why the classics retain their plausibility. Classic texts may eventually become cognitively 'out of date', but probably only after a very long time, and possibly even beyond the lifespan of many of us living today. This slowness contrasts with the rapidity with which new books in sociological theory and social philosophy – some containing theoretical innovations and others not – pour out of the international publishing houses annually. It is in trying to sort out this mountainous output of books that we are sometimes misled into rejecting the durable in favour of the merely modish.

**(v) Pluralism or synthesis?**

Thus the dilemma presents itself at this time. As I explained earlier, in the present phase in the theoretical movement the centrifugal tendency towards theoretical fragmentation has been arrested somewhat by the centripetal tendency towards synthesis. Both tendencies co-exist and constitute in various forms the two poles of current theoretical strategies. Let us look at them in turn.

(i) Many writers accept, on various grounds, the view that some degree of theoretical pluralism is inevitable and even desirable in sociology, so the task then becomes to establish various research strategies based on this starting point. One common form is to enjoin theoretical eclecticism, i.e. the advocacy, as a matter of principle, of the use of concepts derived from many different paradigms, chosen to suit the research task at hand. Here concepts are borrowed from any source if they are found to be useful and are more-or-less mechanically juxtaposed (Merton, 1981; Sanderson, 1987). Many advocates of eclecticism are people who reject the pursuit of a general theory of society in principle; or those who find in eclecticism a practical doctrine which enables them to get on with empirical research without having to agonise about the epistemological consequences of mixing together concepts from various paradigms.

Also based on the same assumption of pluralism is the advocacy of working out disagreements through institutionalised dialogue between paradigms or theories (Anderson, Hughes & Sharrock 1985; Alexander 1987). In a similar vein, it would be possible to list many books which teach sociology as a 'multi-perspective', i.e. pluralistic, social science (Haralambos & Holborn 1991; Cuff, Sharrock & Francis 1990). Another recent strategy which relies on there being rival theories is empirical adjudicationism (Wright 1986; Pawson 1989) through which empirical tests are devised to compare the relative support for competing theories or concepts against each other, through maximising what they have in common. It is noticeable, too, how writers trying to assess the implications for sociology of the controversial current debates about post-modernism and post-modernity, have also been driven inexorably towards a viewpoint of theoretical pluralism and dialogue (Bauman 1992; Boyne & Rattansi 1990). They, too, partake of the centrifugal movement.
(ii) People who advocate theoretical synthesis also start from the reality of competing paradigms, but take the rather more difficult and demanding road of trying to synthesise insights and concepts from them with others derived from the earlier functionalist paradigm. The idea is that the new fusion will maximise the distinctive contributions of the various paradigms and minimise their limitations. Constructed through reasoning, the synthesis constitutes a novel combination of the elements of which it is comprised. The new combination acquires assumptions, concepts and principles of its own. This new synthesis is then offered as a meta-theoretical framework to inform empirical research. On my earlier classification, syntheses are examples of metatheory.

Synthesis differs from eclecticism because in the latter strategy concepts are mechanically juxtaposed for the sake of convenience, whereas in synthesis they are fused, forming a new combination with properties of its own. Synthesis can be located as the continuation of the unifying impulse, which was one important strand of the classical tradition. The earlier functionalist paradigm, which constituted the 'orthodox consensus' in the monopoly phase, was itself a synthesis in social action theory constructed by Parsons in the 30s from a range of concepts and insights taken from the dominant theories developed by social scientists in the decades immediately before (Parsons 1937; Alexander 1987:1-126).

The spirit, if not the sociological letter, of synthesis is exemplified in Britain by the model developed by Johnson, Dandeker and Ashworth (1984). They drew up a 2x2 table created by intersecting the two metaphysical dualisms of nominalism/realism and idealism/materialism. This produces four boxes: empiricism, substantialism, subjectivism and rationalism. Each of these philosophical doctrines is said to articulate one aspect of a unified reality. To use or imply in your sociological work only one means your enquiries remain one-sided. All types of sociological theory have implicitly or explicitly taken a stand on the two dimensions, so can be fitted into one or other of the four boxes: for example, Marx's theory is realist-materialist (i.e. an example of substantialism) or Durkheim's theory is realist-idealistic (i.e. an example of rationalism) and so on.

The idea is that this model will provide a rational yardstick for evaluating any theoretical syntheses in sociology which might subsequently emerge. If a new synthesis is found to have emphasised anything other than all four of the ism's simultaneously (as aspects of a unified reality) it will not represent a true synthesis. For example, they regard Giddens's theory of structuration (see below) as not a true synthesis, because his ambiguous attitude towards realism pushes him too much towards subjectivism. The work of Johnson et al. is, however, ultimately an application to sociological theories of a philosophical metatheory, assumed to be cognitively salient. It is arguably only of marginal interest in sociological theory as such (further critique in Mouzelis 1991).

Within sociological theory in the more strict sense of the term, other examples of attempted syntheses in the current period are those of Randall Collins (1988) which fuses conflict, Durkheimian and symbolic interactionist insights; the 'rational choice' theory of James Coleman (1990); the reconstructed Parsonsian action theory of Richard Münch (Münch 1987 & 1988; critique in Kilmister 1989b); the 'multidimensional collectivist' theory of Jeffrey Alexander (1987); and the 'figurational' approach associated with the rediscovered work of Norbert Elias (Mennell 1989; Elias & Dunning 1986). That list is not exhaustive, but simply contains a selection of the more important examples of this genre at the present time, to indicate the presence of the centripetal movement. The most prominent example in Britain of theoretical synthesis is the theory of structuration of Anthony Giddens (1984) to which I will now turn.
Structuration theory is conceived as a metatheory depicting the nature of human actions and their patterns across the entire society. It is designed, amongst other things, to provide a general framework for informing and coordinating empirical research into the various levels of society. It is also concerned with locating the basic social building blocks that comprise the phenomenon we call the social system. In what does society consist? How do our actions as individuals connect up with those of others beyond our own limited horizon? Giddens is partly involved in trying to describe the stuff of social reality, or the nature of social existence. Since ontology is the study of the nature of existence or entities in the world, structuration theory can legitimately be described as a social ontology.

Giddens takes certain insights from many of the schools which proliferated during the conflict phase (such as ethnomethodology, French structuralism and neo-Marxism) and consolidates them as contributions to sociological theory by combining their insights and concepts with a reconstructed version of the orthodox consensus. In the course of this operation he criticizes functionalism extensively, as he does structuralism and post-structuralism, for failing to see that individuals are not 'judgemental dopes' but knowledgeable and socially skilful, possessing a highly developed capacity for self-monitoring and reflexivity. This model of human individuals is an important motif in Giddens's theory.

In the theory he attempts to bring together in a framework of concepts, through a process of reasoning, the two levels of action and system. He moves off from a critique of Parsons's theory of socialisation as the straightforward internalisation of norms and values which, following Garfinkel, he regards as too mechanical. He sets out to show how the actual process of interaction by the skilled, knowledgeable actors of society itself produces and reproduces the structure and widespread patterning - the degree of 'systemness' - of wider social relations. He tries to establish theoretically the links between the face-to-face encounters of co-present actors and the wider networks of social relations of the social system as a whole.

The tendency of all these social relations gradually, over long periods, to stretch across geographical space, Giddens calls time-space distanciation. The connectedness of people interacting at the 'micro' level he calls social integration and the linkages of these settings to the wider societal networks at the 'macro' level, he refers to as system integration. In this way, he claims, he has overcome the dualism of micro/macro levels. This is a live issue in theory at the moment: see Alexander, Giesen et al. (1987); and Mouzelis (1991). In the latest work of Habermas (1987) the link is referred to as the system/lifeworld relationship.

One of the key ideas in structuration theory is the concept of the 'duality of structure', through which Giddens hopes to transcend the further traditional dualisms of subjectivism/objectivism, voluntarism/determinism, subject/object, statics/dynamics and individual/society left over from European philosophy, the sociological classics and from functionalism. This theme of overcoming dualisms is also very central to the work of Norbert Elias (1978; 1991) and his school, who tackle them differently. Elias uses empirical evidence to show the origins of such dualisms, as part of developing a theory of social figurations to explain why they seem to have such cognitive force as apparently posing mutually exclusive poles of human experience. Giddens, on the other hand, uses rational argumentation alone to reformulate the dualisms as 'dualities'.

Returning to the duality of structure, Giddens suggests that ethnomethodology and phenomenology teach us that acting human subjects, or agents, reflexively
monitor their conduct in complex ways all the time. At the same time, the functionalist orthodoxy and many of the classics, tell us that the objective social structures constrain people’s action. He says that these two ways of looking at human action are falsely seen as mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary aspects of the ways in which agency and structure are ongoingly combined in society. Structures do constrain people to some extent, but at the same time they enable people to be individual social actors. In acting thus, their actions produce and reproduce social structures: hence ‘structuration’. The traditional opposition of voluntarism/determinism now looks wrongly posed. The combined actions of apparently ‘free’ individuals create the constraining social structures which enable them to act as individuals.

Structuration theory paints a picture of an active society producing and reproducing itself, with structures being on-goingly generated by the interactions of reflexively monitoring actors, in one continuous flow. A criticism often thrown at phenomenology and ethnography, which provided Giddens with the inspiration to articulate the active side of this process, was that their focus on skilled interaction ignored power and domination. Being plugged into the classical sociological tradition, however, Giddens knows that when people are interacting with each other, they do not do so equally endowed with resources. These differentials give some people more power over others, which expresses the uneven distribution of power in the society at large.

Invoking a massive weight of sociological tradition, going back to the works of Marx, Weber, Pareto, Elia, Foucault and others, he therefore weaves power into his theory, as the ever present oil that lubricates the interactive cogs and wheels of society:

> Power is not, as such, an obstacle to freedom or emancipation but is their very medium. . . . The existence of power presupposes structures of domination whereby power that ‘flows smoothly’ in processes of social reproduction (and is, as it were, ‘unseen’) operates. The development of force or its threat is thus not the type case of the use of power (Giddens 1984:267).

The exposition of structuration theory in the previous paragraphs is only a brief outline. It is generating considerable controversy and criticism. A number of books on Giddens and his work, including structuration theory, have appeared in the last few years (including Bryant & Jary 1991; Cohen 1989; Held & Thompson 1989; Clark et al. 1990; Craib 1992) as well as a number of individual critiques in the journals. It is not practicable for me to summarise this wealth of analysis here. Instead, I will simply highlight five problem areas in structuration theory as I see them, drawing on my own investigations (Kilminster 1991).

(a) The concept of the ‘duality of structure’, which does not seem to be able to deal adequately with the more durable, objective constraints in society; (b) the rationalistic model of the knowledgeable, reflexive, human actor embodied in the theory, which is wrongly assumed to be a historical constant; (c) the exclusion of human emotions and the role in society of social standards of affect control and individual self-control; (d) the focus on social interaction is at the expense of an understanding of interdependence; and (e) the neglect of questions of epistemology and ethics in the theory (a criticism developed further by Bryant, 1992).
5 Conclusion: deeper waters

The shifts from the monopoly phase of the orthodox consensus to a phase of intense paradigm conflict, into a phase of quiescent pluralism and efforts at synthesis, is a profound sequence of changes in our sociological culture. It needs explaining sociologically. I have reconstructed the movement in the plausible immanent sequence of the three-phase model, with odd references here and there to the wider extra-theoretical, social processes of which it forms a part. The social forces that drove this sequence along need to be stated more precisely. Why did the orthodox consensus possess the established power it apparently did? Why were the battles of the ‘war of the schools’ fought with such passion? Why do people in sociology today seek common ground between themselves? Why have the traces of earlier paradigm-group allegiance faded from many concepts that we now regard as common to us all? The tying in of the theoretical developments more closely with the changing power relations between paradigm-groups and academic establishments, is a very challenging sociological task and systematic work in this area is in its infancy.

Key terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUBSTANTIVE THEORY</td>
<td>POST-EMPIRICISM</td>
<td>PLURALISM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METATHEORY</td>
<td>CONSTRUCTIVISM</td>
<td>ECLECTICISM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRITICAL THEORY</td>
<td>REALISM</td>
<td>DIALOGUE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCOPE</td>
<td>NOMINALISM</td>
<td>ADJUDICATIONISM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELEVANCE</td>
<td>COGNITIVISM</td>
<td>SYNTHESIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INVOLVEMENT</td>
<td>IDEALISM</td>
<td>CENTRIFUGAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DETACHMENT</td>
<td>MATERIALISM</td>
<td>CENTRIPETAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARADIGM</td>
<td>EPistemology</td>
<td>STRUCTURE/AGENCY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HERMENEUTICS</td>
<td>ONTOLOGY</td>
<td>STRUCTURATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSITIVISM</td>
<td>SENSITIZING CONCEPTS</td>
<td>FIGURATION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to Anthea Hammond for her comments on earlier versions of this chapter and to Ian Varcoe for allowing me to draw upon an unpublished working document on theory teaching that we wrote jointly in 1984.

References


Held, David, & Thompson, John (eds) 1989. Social Theory of Modern Societies: Anthony Giddens and His Critics, Cambridge U.P.
160 Developments in Sociology Vol. 8


Skocpol, Theda, 1979. States and Social Revolutions, Cambridge University Press.


Wrong, Dennis, 1981. 'The oversocialized conception of man in modern sociology', American Sociological Review, 26, No. 2 (April), pp. 183–93 (See also his Postscript to this article of 1975 in his Skeptical Sociology, Columbia U.P., 1976).