

BARRY BARNES

# The Elements of Social Theory



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## **The elements of social theory**



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# Preface

This book is an attempt to identify those fundamental themes and ideas in social theory that currently possess the most plausibility, and hence deserve the most attention in future research and the greatest trust when theory is applied. The outcome will be clear and evident in what follows. However, the enterprise itself involved a review and evaluation of basic ideas and assumptions in a number of different theoretical traditions. This quickly made it apparent that, although most of these different traditions are rightly regarded as incompatible with each other, they are all *none the less of great value as sources of theoretical insight*, and all indubitably necessary for what might be called an education in theory. It has been necessary to work through these traditions in order to formulate the finished argument of this book, and their fundamental characteristics and claims are set out and analyzed here accordingly. This ought to make the book of use in the teaching of sociological theory, perhaps for students who are taking their studies further after an initial introduction to the subject. In Britain, I hope it will help to complement the much more widespread approach of learning theory via theorists. In the USA, it will not represent a neglected approach to theory in the same way, but here too it may be that its strategy of concentrating on fundamentals will give it a distinctive value.

Some readers, particularly those already well versed in social theory, *may wish to read the book selectively*. There is no reason why they should not; it is even possible to begin with the second part, using the index to refer back where necessary. However, the book offers a positive argument that builds cumulatively from one chapter to the next and



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this needs to be kept in mind. Parts of this basic argument have appeared in earlier publications; in particular, some themes of Chapters 3 and 4 are prefigured in a paper in *Sociological Review* (Barnes 1990), and the key argument of Chapter 5 is given in *Sociology* (Barnes 1992). The general sociological approach builds upon that adopted in an earlier book on *The nature of power* (Barnes 1988) and the way the approach is illustrated and exemplified in the present text is designed to avoid overlap with the examples given prominence there. The treatment of social institutions and distributions of self-referring knowledge in that book may also be found useful in that it complements and serves to expand the scope of the argument of the present work.

The wide range of materials covered by the book has led me to call on the help of a large number of friends and colleagues, all of whom deserve thanks for the unstinting assistance they gave. Colleagues in my department at Exeter University all deserve acknowledgement, but I particularly need to mention those who read parts of the manuscript: Grace Davie, Tia DeNora, Paul Keating, Steve Loyal, Greg Martin, Bob Snowden and Bob Witkin all provided valuable comments and criticisms that helped me to improve the text. Thanks are also due to Andrew Travers, John Vincent and Steve Reicher. Friends and former colleagues at Edinburgh University also played an important part in the evolution of the book, and I would like to mention particularly David Bloor, Colin Bell and Colwyn Trevarthen. Randall Collins must also be thanked, both for specific comments on an earlier version of Chapter 5 and for more general inspiration; and so too must Peter Abell for his kindness in finding time where there was none, in order to read and comment on Chapter 1. Finally, I want to thank Mary Guy, who also performed miracles with time in her invaluable work on the production of the manuscript.

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January 1995

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# Introduction

Sociological theories come in many forms and are directed to many different ends. Much the most widely read theories, however, at least in Europe, are those that serve as the basis for commentary on the nature of present-day industrial societies and on how they are likely to develop and change. At the same time, these “macro” theories are the ones that give rise to the greatest amount of dissatisfaction and elicit the strongest criticisms. Macro theorists are notorious for confusing the future they would like to see with the future that can plausibly be expected, to the extent that many outsiders have come to discount their work as worse than useless as a basis for an understanding of social change. And indeed theorists themselves frequently acknowledge that this is so. Most of the pivotal events of the century, up to and including 1989, have evoked laments for the failure of theory, while Marxists, who have been a major force in the European tradition of macro theory, treat it as in crisis just so long as the capitalist system is not. This recognition of failure does at least acknowledge an obligation to orient theory to actuality, to attempt to explain our present state and predict how it will change, and to evaluate the success of such attempts. Other theorists appear to have given up on this kind of activity altogether, and to have reconciled themselves to following along in the tracks of change, offering discourses for its *ex post facto* rationalization – diverse discourses to meet the needs of all the different sources of demand that arise in the academic market places of competitive capitalist societies. Perhaps it is this development in particular that has led to the complaint that sociological theory is no longer any such thing, that what now exists is ersatz theory, a substitute for theory, a hotchpotch of critique, philosophy, taxonomy, history, the biography of theorists, practically anything, in fact, save theory itself (Mullins 1991).

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In these circumstances, it is not surprising that some sociologists see the way forward as involving a turn away from theory and a renewed appreciation of the merits of empiricism. Certainly, there are virtues in empiricism, and many theorists have been far too involved in reconnoitring the road to paradise to give proper heed to them. But a policy of retreat from theory should not be pressed too far. Even those sociologists with the greatest respect for "the facts" recognize that in isolation they offer us nothing. If facts are the pearls of a field of enquiry, they must none the less be threaded on a rope of theory before they are capable of assuming a shape or defining a direction and thereby creating expectations of any kind. The formulation of links and connections between particulars is what theorizing is. Where there is no theorizing, there is no sociology. What is generally recognized as the literature of sociological theory is merely an outcrop of a great array of loosely connected theoretical orientations incarnate in the practice of the field as a whole: its references to socialization and enculturation, norms and values, classes and interests, kinds of actions, mobility and stratification, and so forth, involve the use, if perhaps in an unusually abstract way, of concepts that are found everywhere. The difficulties of macro sociological theory are thus, for the most part, the difficulties of the field of which it is a part, exposed to view in a particularly cruel and brightly lit way, dissociated from the particular achievements that stand to the credit of most of the specific substantive fields in sociology.

Evidently, the need is not for a turn away from theory but for continued efforts to improve it and thereby the field as a whole. There are always those who wish to believe that sociological theories, like all other theories of voluntary human behaviour, are part of an impossible project. But no plausible argument on behalf of this view exists. And in its absence the mere fact that a tradition of theory has a poor track record is no reason for its termination. With patient work, theory could come good any century now. The single criticism that can validly be levelled against practically all macro sociological theorists is that they have been in too much of a rush.

Needless to say, improvements and reconstructions of theory cannot be carried out in the course of its use in theoretical commentary. This would be rather like trying to reconstruct theoretical physics whilst designing a nuclear power station. Large pronouncements about the nature of modern societies and their institutions, even if for many they count as the acme of sociological theory, are in fact just applications of

its basic concepts and ideas, and amongst the most problematic and least clear-cut applications at that. To know theory only at this level is to have no practised autonomy with respect to it, to be unduly dependent on it or perhaps even upon particular exponents of it. In order to grasp what sociological theory can offer, its strengths and weaknesses, its present failings and future possibilities, it is necessary to move away from secondary applications and to focus upon its basic form. This is what the present book seeks to do. It is the result of digging into the literature that carries theory along at this fundamental level, looking through the resources available therein, tentatively checking different approaches against some substantive materials, trying to gain a sense of what holds promise and what does not. It has involved an examination of basic theories in a number of different theoretical traditions, most of the traditions, in fact, currently sustained in the social sciences: this indeed is why, given that (ideally) all the different social science fields should be theoretically integrated and continuous with each other, the title speaks of "social theory" rather than "sociological theory". None the less, the book has been written with sociology predominantly in mind, and the main purpose of the book is to present an account of the basic form that theory ought to take in that field. The book is designed to convey a coherent conception of this basic form, to set out the grounds for regarding that particular conception as a plausible one, and to show that it is applicable to substantive problems.

Since this positive conception emerges only slowly as the book proceeds, it may be useful to give a preliminary indication of what it consists in. An important part of it is simply a reaffirmation of the platitude that human beings are, of their nature, social creatures. There is impressive empirical evidence for this conjecture, which ought perhaps to be regarded as a central dogma of sociology, a claim that the field should keep, at all times, at the forefront of its thought. The particular version of the dogma to be offered here holds that human sociability is deep-seated and pervasive. It will not do for macro sociological theory to conceive of it simply as a source of constraint and restriction on the individual, a way of accounting for her actions as conforming actions, and for social order as an harmonious, conflict-free system of such actions. Rather our sociability should be conceived of as a continuing, profound, mutual susceptibility, which finds expression in aligned cognition, shared language and knowledge, and indeed in the existence of all manner of powers, skills and capacities that can be readily combined and

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co-ordinated with those of other people. Our sociability is what allows us to achieve an intelligibly ordered social life through and as the collective use of all these powers. Thus, rather than restricting us to, or confining us within, a given social order, our sociability is what facilitates its production and allows its continuing reconstitution and recreation.

To insist that we are social creatures and to treat this as a matter of profound and pervasive significance is to announce a strongly anti-individualistic sociological theory, and just that will be forthcoming. However, rather than rejecting the individualistic contribution to social theory, the strategy here will be to begin with it and work through it. It constitutes an immensely impressive body of work, systematic, lucid, exemplary in its self-criticism, which any account of theory needs to address and evaluate. And here there is an added incentive, in that the limitations of individualism point the way forward for the positive argument. Thus, as far as this argument is concerned, it is particularly important to address the claims that separate individuals are unable to act collectively (section 1.4), or to conform to rules or norms (section 2.4), or even to know what rules or norms specifically imply (sections 2.4, 4.3).

Those readers wishing particularly to follow the positive argument may wish to take special note of references to the problem of collective action, since they will serve as a marker of the progress of that argument. The problem, also known as the free-rider problem, is introduced in section 1.4 as a notorious problem for individualistic social theory: collective action manifestly exists, but according to individualism it should not. Subsequently, however, the problem is used more generally as a touchstone of a good social theory. In particular, it is argued that the existence of collective action will not be accounted for by any theory that deals in independent individuals. Independent calculative individuals will not act collectively, but neither will the socialized individuals of functionalism: neither moral individuals, nor individuals oriented to norms or rules, nor individuals predisposed in any other way will solve the collective action problem so long as they operate separately. For collective action must continually be monitored and adapted to circumstances, aligned and realigned with what others are doing, and it is not possible to predispose an autonomous individual mind so that it may adapt and realign actions in the way that is required. However, it is then argued that interacting, non-independent, mutually susceptible individuals may do what independent individuals cannot. Continually communicating with each other on the

basis of a body of shared knowledge and culture, constantly influencing each other through symbolically mediated evaluations, operating as a collective in thought and calculation, they are able to formulate, encourage and perform actions for their collective good, and to monitor, modify and adapt those actions so that they remain oriented to that good. And, having made this case in the first part of the book, the problem of collective action remains at the centre of interest in the second as the argument is evaluated and illustrated in the course of a substantive discussion of social formations.

The picture of the human condition to be presented in what follows is a reasonably simple one, and one that is already to be found at work here and there in various contexts in the social sciences. Yet it is not routinely encountered in macro social theory, even as an approach to be criticized and rejected. Perhaps this is because of the strongly anti-individualistic character of the picture. For all that it is often hostile to the individualism of economic theory, macro sociological theory is suffused with individualistic forms of thought, many of which are hard to reconcile with what is to be put forward here. There is, for example, a widely accepted policy in macro theory of separating off “instrumental” and “economic” actions, and treating them as “non-social”, for all that they are knowledge based and co-ordinated with other actions on the basis of shared knowledge. Secondly, there is a tendency to understand “genuinely social” actions, such as actions oriented to norms, or moral principles or ritual requirements, by privatizing them, as it were, and making them wholly a matter between the individual performer and the particular norm, or principle or rite in question. Thirdly, this tendency to privatization may be exacerbated by an essentialist treatment of concepts, beliefs and ideas (possibly related to the fact that, for theorists, these are items of intellectual property). If ideas and so forth are conceptualized as essences, then it is easy to think of them taking up residence in individual minds and the encounter between individual and society occurring wholly at an ideal level, without the continuing mediation of other people, which will be identified as crucial here.

This is not a book about particular sociologists. None the less, it is interesting to ask whether the tendencies just described might not be the consequence of a neglect of Durkheim in the practice of macro social theory. He is the seminal figure above all others who insists upon a comprehensively sociological approach and offers protection against lapses into individualism. Yet, although his place on a pedestal goes unchal-

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lenged, his role in the practice of macro theory, particularly in the English-speaking world, is less than it should be. There is still a residual reserve, in this context, at Durkheim's acceptance of the *sui generis* reality of collectives and collective phenomena. The proper response to this is not to deny the serious problems and difficulties of the Durkheimian position, but rather to notice that they are no more formidable than the problems of an individualistic alternative. Why, for example, should it be improper to attribute thought, inference or calculation to collectives, but not to individual persons? Certainly, the sound waves and light rays that carry messages between the component brains of a collective are more accessible to investigation than the neuronal transmissions that are said to fulfil the same role within a single brain. We should not infer the superior merit of individualistic metaphysics and epistemology from the mere fact of their popularity.

Durkheim was one of the great social theorists, but many of the currents of influence flowing from his work have passed around rather than through the main body of social theory. He has been important to interactionist theorists whose "micro sociology" has always stood at a distance from the major trends of sociological theory itself. He has been an inspiration to social anthropologists in their studies of culture and belief. His work on knowledge and classification has been built upon in the sociology of knowledge, even as sociological theory generally has avoided it. Now that sociological theory is coming to recognize the pressing need for a general understanding of social interaction, and of the knowledge and culture it sustains, it is likely in due course thoroughly to reassimilate Durkheimian approaches that for so long it has tended to neglect. This book could conceivably be read as an attempt to imagine the fundamental form that theory might come to take as a result of such a reassimilation, although this is not a point that is laboured in the text itself.

The positive argument offered in this book requires a movement through most of the theoretical traditions of social theory. Hence, it has been possible to provide a review of key ideas in these traditions, so that the book may serve a range of purposes in the context of sociology, without adding inordinately to its length. It could even be that there are positive virtues in the strategy that has been followed. Certainly, the thought that the book might perhaps be used on theory courses of serious intent, taken together with the fact that sociologists tend on the whole to work within rather than across theoretical traditions, has encouraged an

attempt to deal with issues in the simplest possible terms, and to avoid adding to the already considerable difficulties of fundamental points of theory by an unduly complex or abstract presentation. Only in the two codas is this approach modified in favour of something that, although substantially more demanding of background knowledge, is none the less both looser and more allusive. But a coda normally follows the completion of the argument of a work, and by convention here it is forgivable if the line is blurred by a certain amount of noise. The codas, let it be clear, are in the way of optional extras.

Although it seeks to avoid unnecessary complication, this is not a book to use in a first encounter with sociological theory. Some initial familiarity with the literature, and particularly with the ideas of the seminal sociological theorists, will be useful background. However, this is not a book about theorists. It is a book about theoretical ideas in which theorists make appearances, just as ideas make appearances in books about theorists. Theorists are mentioned to ease the task of understanding for those who may know them, and to give some indication of where the reader might turn for further reflections on the relevant theoretical issues. No attempt is made to identify the "best" theorists, or to direct attention only to the most recent contributions to the field, or to become involved in currently celebrated debates or confrontations. Above all, this book must not be looked to for accounts of what this or that theorist "really said" or "really meant". Excavation of that kind is a wholly different task from that engaged in here: it requires the exacting methods of the historian and limitless drafts of time. Fortunately, in so far as the distinction can be drawn, it can be theoretically productive to misunderstand theorists as well as to understand them correctly.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that in a book such as this, which both reviews a number of possible theoretical positions and presents a particular one, there is an inevitable internal tension between what is ideally required by these different tasks, between balance and advocacy. But there is a specific feature of social theory that substantially diminishes the problem, to the great good fortune of all who write on the subject. This is its very low credibility. There is no need to be on guard in this field, as there may be in others, lest a clearly formulated opinion is confused with a fact or a truth. The social theorist need not trouble to cast off any significant accumulation of unwanted authority. The need for caution, reserve and a tentative presentation is less than acute, since the reader is going to take for granted that these are intrinsic to theoriz-



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ing in any case. Not even those who lack a training in deconstruction are likely to be adversely affected by the absence of these elements of style and expression. Thus, in this context, the economical idiom of confident assertion may be adopted, secure in the knowledge that it is harmless and that, by stating what is the case, a text automatically inspires, as well, the thought that it may not be the case after all.

# Part I

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## Traditions of social theory

In the context of social theory, there are many ways in which the resources of tradition may be described as so many distinct traditions. What follows represents just one of many such possibilities. Some theorists would draw attention to a Marxian tradition and thereby bring together and relate materials that are cited separately here. More profoundly, many theorists see social change as the central concern of sociology, not the persistence of pattern and order in social life that is identified as the key concern of those traditions of social theory discussed in what follows. What I hope will emerge, however, as the discussion proceeds, is that persistence and change are but different sides of the same coin, and that to understand one is to understand the other.

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# Individualism

## 1.1 Postulates of individualism

. . . during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe they are in that condition which is called warre; and such a warre is of every man against every man. . . . It is consequent also to the same condition, that there be no Propriety, no Dominion, no *Mine* and *Thine* distinct; but only that to be every mans that he can get; and for so long as he can keep it. And thus much for the ill condition, which man by meer Nature is actually placed in; though with a possibility to come out of it. (Hobbes 1651)

The most challenging way of responding to Hobbes is to take him literally and attempt to envisage his state of war. Does it preclude all social relationships? What of linguistic relationships: are linguistic communication and the sharing of knowledge and ideas precluded as well? And where might people be found living in this “natural” condition, if indeed it is a condition in which people conceivably could live? These, however, are large questions, too large for our immediate purposes. It will be better to start with a narrower, more conventional approach, one that recognizes that Hobbes’ account of the state of nature is designed not to inspire a search, but rather to make peace and order in society the focus of curiosity, and to introduce an individualistic account of how they are sustained. This has become the standard mode of use of Hobbes in the context of modern sociological theory.

Hobbes poses a problem of social order deriving from the conflicting wants of individual human beings and their mutual distrust, and he offers a solution based on the common fear of coercion by a single sovereign

power. Hobbes' solution is no longer widely accepted, but his individualistic formulation of both problem and solution remains of great importance. Individualism continues to be a thriving theoretical tradition today, and is in many ways the least problematic of all the traditions of social theory. Our immediate awareness of social life is awareness of individuals. We watch individuals doing things, take account of them as we do things ourselves, try to guess what they are likely to do as we work out our own future plans. And when we gather data as social scientists it is usually data about individuals; indeed it is not obvious what else there is, in the last analysis, to observe, besides the activities of individuals and the products of that activity. Thus, it is perfectly plausible to conjecture that it is through observing individuals, and theorizing about the basis of what they individually do, that we shall come to an understanding of social life and social order, that a society is the aggregate of all the separately engendered actions of its individual members.

There are many kinds of individualism and the term means different things in different contexts, but for present purposes it will suffice to look at the predominant form of individualism in current theory. This is the form of individualism, particularly favoured in economics, that takes as its point of departure "the two well-known *a priori*s of self-interest and calculative rationality" (Reisman 1990: 10). In specifying calculative rationality and self-interest this approach seeks to identify the ways in which individuals remain independent of each other and stably internally constituted, as they engage in the fluctuating circumstances of social life. Individuals are to be treated as independent reasoning and information-processing systems with independent ends or objectives. To this extent individuals are unaffected by other people or indeed their environment in general, even though in other ways they may be profoundly affected by both, and obliged to take account of both. To this extent individuals stand as so many independent sources of action. This crucially simplifies the task of understanding entire systems of actions: if the actions are separately produced, then they are amenable to deductive modelling and aggregation by quantitative methods. These are very much the preferred techniques of most current individualistic theorists, and it can indeed be asked how far individualistic postulates are adopted not in response to evidence but in order to facilitate and simplify the application of these *mathematical techniques*.

Certainly, individualistic theorists tend to agree not only in their theoretical point of departure but in their methodology. They favour a deduc-

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tive approach to social theory, and their work serves to exemplify the merits and problems of that approach. They start with simple postulates about the behaviour of individual human beings, and the overall outcome of that behaviour in any given context is then deduced from the postulates. In the form of individualism that concerns us here, four postulates are generally taken as fundamental. Human beings are presumed to be:<sup>1</sup>

- independent
- rational/calculative
- goal-oriented
- egoistic or self-regarding

The assumption of independence is the most important of all. The entire individualistic approach is based upon the conviction that actions are produced by agents whose objectives and decision-making procedures are stable, intrinsic characteristics independent of the immediate context. Individualism expects individuals to take account of their environment and of the actions of other individuals in it, but not to change their nature or intrinsic properties in response to them. Individualism wants to use the rationality and the objectives of individuals as givens with which to explain other things, not as variables that are in need of explanation themselves.

Individuals are assumed to be rational and calculative (and hence knowledgeable, since knowledge is required for calculation), in order to account for their ability to imagine the consequences of possible actions prior to choosing which they will actually perform. There are, however, different accounts of what is involved in being rational and calculative.

The assumption that individuals have goals (often referred to as "wants" or "desires" by individualists) is made in order to explain why they should choose one course of action rather than another. It is commonly assumed that the wants of individuals can be ranked in an order of priority or preference and that individuals act optimally to realize their preferences. It is also generally assumed that preferences and their rank ordering are fixed and stable. "The assumption of stable preferences . . . prevents the analyst from succumbing to the temptation of simply postulating the required shift in preferences to 'explain' all apparent contradictions to his predictions" (Becker 1976: 5).

Finally, it is commonly assumed that the wants and desires of individuals relate to their own benefit rather than the benefit of others, that individuals are egoistic and self-regarding. This, however, is the least important of the four postulates, and is often set aside. The crucial fea-

tures of the individualistic perspective in social theory can be sustained without an assumption of egoism. The mathematical apparatus of individualism needs independent stable objectives or preferences, but the apparatus still operates whether or not they are egoistic ones.

In a nutshell, individualism assumes that an agent in a social situation will operate as follows: she will independently take stock of the situation; rationally calculate in the light of what she knows how each available action is liable to affect that situation; note which action is likely to be the most effective in furthering her goals; and enact that action accordingly. Where the individual is egoistic, goals will be self-serving and actions will be self-interested. Such a hypothetical individual, because it is commonly postulated in economic theories of human behaviour, is sometimes referred to as manifesting "economic rationality". Where the need arises, she will be referred to here accordingly as an ER individual.

In a society of ER individuals, all actions are individually calculated, rational, goal-oriented and (usually) self-regarding. Individualism implies therefore that all the actions actually found in social situations are of this kind, and seeks to predict the overall patterns of action we are likely to find in social situations given that every individual action is indeed of this kind. Unfortunately, however, there is no way of predicting from the basic postulates how individuals will act if they are brought together, as it were, as so many separate bodies in an unspecified environment. Plausible predictions are possible only if individuals operate in a context wherein their choices are heavily constrained by *externalities* of some kind. In the context of much current individualistic social theory, external constraint is provided artificially; ER individuals appear as players in games invented by theorists. The rules of the games are assumed to constrain the players, and rational playing strategies are inferred. Real human beings are believed to be involved in situations analogous to the games, so that a game in the theory will serve as a model of real human behaviour. For example, a game in which rational individuals exchange goods may be taken as a model of the economic life of real human beings. The rules of the game may be taken as analogous to the legal rules surrounding economic life, and the nature of the theorized ER individuals as analogous to the nature of the real human beings exchanging goods. Predictions about real activities of exchange then become possible by considering the theoretical game of exchange.

This approach to social theory is a familiar and oft-encountered one. It

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is commonplace in economics, as we have already noted. And it is also an important component of modern political theory and sociological theory, wherein it exists as game theory and rational choice theory.<sup>2</sup> For all that, however, there is no doubt that, of the social science disciplines, sociology is the least sympathetic to this individualist approach. Indeed, most of the seminal figures in the tradition of sociological theory have uncompromisingly opposed it. For Emile Durkheim, opposition to individualism was part and parcel of the business of establishing the discipline of sociology. Much of Talcott Parsons' theoretical work was devoted to establishing the insufficiency of individualism. The Marxian tradition, until the advent of "rational-choice Marxism", has been predominantly anti-individualistic. Max Weber, although a "methodological individualist", initiated a tradition of sociological theory that emphasized the insufficiency of theories based upon "economic rationality".

It is because of this that the crucial importance of individualistic assumptions in sociological theory is often overlooked. The seminal theorists actually rely upon individualistic kinds of explanation. What these theorists say is that the individual is not *just* an independent calculative egoist, which is to acknowledge that the individual is this some of the time, or to some degree. Thus, in the work of Talcott Parsons (1937, 1951), the individual human being is depicted as in a state of tension between the egoistic urges inherent in her nature and countervailing pressures originating in society and its moral order. Parsons holds that social order is possible only when egoism is sufficiently overridden by countervailing pressures, but equally he acknowledges that egoism is always incompletely overridden, that "rational" egoistic actions are always encountered in any society, and indeed that such actions are necessary parts of social life and essential to any understanding of the course of social change. The same actions play crucial roles in the theories of all the founders of sociology, constituting much of the realm of the profane for the early Durkheim, lurking in the domain of the economy in both Marx and Weber. Nor are they any less significant in current work. In the theories of Jürgen Habermas, for example, they are present among the "non-social" instrumental actions, oriented wholly to technical success, that play a leading role in his vision of modern capitalist societies (Habermas 1984: 285).

It is crucial to recognize the role of individualism and of the theoretical construction of the ER individual in the mainstream of sociological theory. If there is anything lacking in this construction it will have impli-

cations not just for economics or for fields such as game theory but for the core of sociology as well. As some applications of the individualistic approach and its characteristic methods are explored in what follows, and a sense of its limitations and deficiencies is thereby eventually evoked, this point needs to be kept firmly in mind.

## 1.2 Co-ordination

The powers and possibilities of ER individuals are of great sociological interest. What are they capable of doing? What games are they able to play, and how will they play them? Will they do the kinds of things that real people do in real social situations? Many kinds of action are generally agreed to be performable by ER individuals. Even Durkheim and Parsons allow them to act directly upon the physical environment to further their goals, and to play, within given systems of enforceable rules, the games of exchange studied by economists. But these are far from being the only capacities that ER individuals possess. Another extremely important one is that of *co-ordination*.

Imagine a number of individuals acting simultaneously, with each able to choose between alternative actions. Many combinations of actions will be possible. Imagine now that all individuals agree which are the best and worst combinations, and that they all want one of the best possible combinations to be produced. In this sense, all the individuals may be said to have the same interests. They all share an interest in *co-ordinating* their actions so that a best overall combination is the outcome. ER individuals should be good at co-ordinating their actions. As each individual seeks the same outcome, there should be no serious obstacle to its achievement even in a society of egoists.

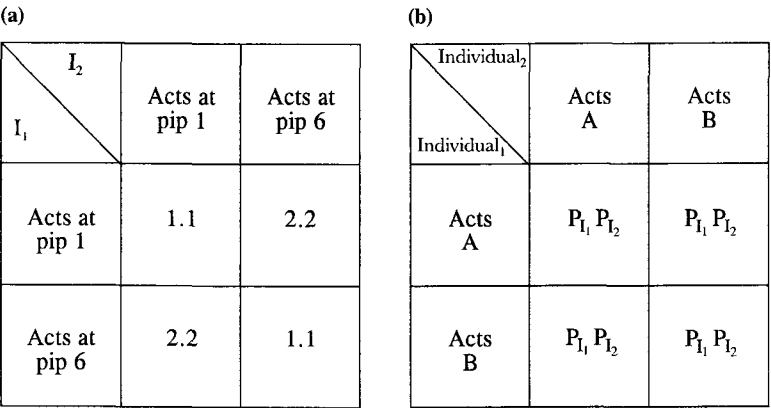
Difficulties may none the less arise in achieving co-ordination. Consider two individuals seeking to lift a piano onto a platform. To lift the piano, a concerted, synchronized, all-out heave is essential. So the pair set a radio by the piano and agree to lift at the instant of two o'clock. They each grasp the piano, draw breath, tense muscles, and await the signal. Alas, one of them then cannot remember whether it is the first or last of the six forthcoming pips that signifies two o'clock. And as she seeks to recall the crucial missing information, it occurs to her to ask whether after all the other party may not also be in difficulty on the same matter. About to explode into action, united in a common goal, alike in



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their interests, a problem of co-ordination none the less arises for the two participants. Should they manage to heave in concert, whether at the first pip or the last, success will be theirs. But should they act just ever so slightly out of phase, one at the first pip, the other at the last, the result will be likely hospitalization and an unmoved piano.

Individualistic social theories, and in particular game theory and decision theory, make use of formal representations of the general problems they study. The problem of co-ordination just described can be represented as in Figure 1.1. Note how, for the purposes of formal representation, the two individuals must be treated as playing a game wherein only two alternative actions are allowed; they cannot be modelled as they would exist in a real world situation where any number of actions would be open to them. Each individual must take either action A (lifting at the first pip) or action B (lifting at the last pip). Four combinations of actions are possible: in two they lift together and in the other two out of phase. Both individuals give the possible outcomes the same order of preference. They both want to achieve a concerted lift and avoid an out-of-phase one. Lifting together, either on the first or the last pip indifferently, is the first preference; lifting out of phase is likewise, for both, the second preference. It is because there are two equally good routes to co-ordination, via the first pip and via the last, that a problem exists. Precisely because both possibilities are equally good there is no knowing what the other individual is going to do, even if that other is an ER indi-



**Figure 1.1** Co-ordination. (a) Example in text. (b) General form of diagram ( $P_i$  = rank of preference of individual  $I_i$ ).

vidual. A guess will be necessary, with only a 50:50 chance of success.

The kind of co-ordination problem of which this is an example is the product of inadequate knowledge. Shared goals and interests in themselves do not narrow the possibilities of action sufficiently. Further narrowing must be achieved by agreement, but for that shared knowledge and shared understanding are necessary. To recognize that this is the nature of the problem is to see how to solve it. The creation of further shared knowledge and shared understandings suffices. Were the two individuals in the above example to become professional lifters of heavy objects they would readily develop reliable routines of co-ordination, based on shared knowledge. Sufficient shared knowledge to make the required co-ordination possible is all that is necessary here, because the individuals want to co-ordinate. Because they have common goals and interests, ER individuals can trust each other here. Indeed, they can trust each other to seek the possibility of co-ordination as well as to enact it when it is recognized. And the former may actually be invaluable in securing the latter.

Schelling (1960), whose writings on co-ordination are seminal, offers a number of examples of this kind. Consider two individuals who lose each other in the course of a walk. The mist-laden country is largely featureless, but just one sharp tor or summit is marked rising from the land, on a map otherwise largely empty of information. The individuals need to reunite. The tor is the only "special" point nearby, the only place uniquely defined in their shared knowledge (the map). Each knows that the other wants to reunite. The only plans or strategies for co-ordination must involve the tor. The simplest plan would be to meet at the top, something readily achievable, even in mist, by walking upwards. Why not go to the top in the hope that the other will go as well? The reasoning is thin, but there is nothing better. Just because there is nothing better it may be that it is good enough. Recognizing that there is no better thing to do, both individuals may proceed to the top – and meet. Schelling calls the tor the *prominent solution* to the co-ordination problem, and suggests that its adoption is likely simply because it is prominent. Where the important thing for people is that they agree on *something*, and what is agreed on is secondary, then prominent solutions figure large because they are things that *can* be agreed upon.

It is plausible to imagine that, if our two individuals were to repeat this walk, they might say at the start: "If we lose each other, we'll meet at the tor." With co-ordination problems, solutions evolved on one occasion tend to be used on further occasions. Forms of solution are laid down in

the social stock of knowledge and future social action becomes more co-ordinated in consequence. This is a profoundly significant social process. It may be, for example, that it is currently at work in Britain in our voting behaviour. Do you wish your local MP removed? Is this more important than how precisely she is replaced? Then the candidate for the party in second place at the previous election offers a prominent solution, a place around which to co-ordinate voting. And, in so far as the vote around this position grows in one election, so it may attract more votes at the next.<sup>3</sup>

When large numbers of individuals solve co-ordination problems, the resulting patterns of activity involve the following of *conventions*, and it is in the interest of ER individuals to continue to follow such conventions. Examples include our continuing to drive on the left (right), our use of the VHS video format, our referring to Greenwich Mean Time (or whatever other time). What is characteristic of these examples is that it is in our interest to conform to them just in so far as (nearly) everyone else does so. There is no intrinsic merit in driving on the left rather than on the right, but it is a matter of life and death that we drive on the side that others drive on. The intrinsic qualities of VHS were apparently inferior to those of competing now-defunct video formats, but the advantages of purchasing the most-purchased format, and the skilful initial establishment of VHS as the prominent candidate, led to its achieving a virtual monopoly.<sup>4</sup>

Conventions in the precise sense set out above are ubiquitous in all societies, and the ability of ER individuals to create and sustain them is of great theoretical significance. Yet the importance of work on co-ordination has only quite recently been properly emphasized in discursive sociological theory; and in this context there is still a need for greater appreciation of its value as a theoretical resource.

Many problems associated with power can be clarified by thinking of them as co-ordination problems. Consider the example of the two individuals lifting the piano. Neither individual separately possesses this power. Only when they act in a relationship with each other, whereby their actions are co-ordinated, is this power created: the power to lift a piano. And it is similarly the case generally that through co-ordination individuals become able to do more; their capabilities increase; their powers multiply. This is a neat and simple way of displaying the inadequacy of the old *zero-sum* conception of power. The zero-sum conception assumed that the gain of power by one agent implied a corresponding loss of power by another agent or agents. It implied that powerful agents were necessarily exploiting others by depriving them of power.

The zero-sum conception can appear very plausible and persuasive. For whatever reason, we sometimes have difficulty with the notion that power can be generated “out of nowhere” as it were, simply by ordering our actions so that they are co-ordinated. There is a tendency to regard power as something almost material, a substance that has to come from somewhere and reside somewhere. Power produced by co-ordination seems to come from nowhere, which we find hard to acknowledge. Marx noted the tendency to redescribe such power as something substantial, something that was “always there”.

The productive power developed by the labourer when working in co-operation is the productive power of capital. This productive power of associated labour is developed gratuitously, whenever the workmen are placed under given conditions, and it is capital that places them under such conditions. Because this power costs capital nothing, and because, on the other hand, the labourer himself does not develop it before his labour belongs to capital, it appears as a power with which capital is endowed by Nature – a productive power that is immanent in capital. (Marx [1883] 1974: 349)

Modern capitalist societies are very highly co-ordinated indeed. Their powers, their capacities and capabilities, are massively amplified by this co-ordination. Their productive output, which reflects the exploitation of these powers, is vastly increased. What gets done through co-ordinated actions is orders of magnitude greater than what could get done without co-ordination. Moreover, individual interests in retaining overall co-ordination, always present, always strong, are especially strong in modern societies, where individual actions are bound up into co-ordination with the actions of a diverse range of others to an unusual degree. All this must help to account for the stability of the key institutional arrangements of these societies.

This is not to say that the status quo is, for most individuals, the best of all possible worlds, or even that there is no alternative that most people could agree upon as preferable. It is merely to note the high conversion costs of a shift even to a thoroughly practical utopia, if an initial loss of co-ordination is involved. In the face of ever-increasing individually borne conversion costs, the attractions of putting up with the inherited social and political order, rather as we put up with VHS, are correspondingly enhanced. Patterns of social change that retain co-ordination are