rethinking social theory

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Roger Sibeon

SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 100 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 0 7619 5068 0
ISBN 0 7619 5069 9

Library of Congress control number available

Typeset by C&M Digitals (P) Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Athenaeum Press, Gateshead

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Preface

Although this is not a text for beginners, it is hoped not only academics but advanced undergraduate and graduate students will wish to engage with the ideas set out in the following pages. Readers will encounter exposition and critique of contemporary theoretical problems and approaches, and be invited to form a personal judgement about the author's proposals for the future development of theoretical sociology. The contents and design of the chapters, and of the notes that follow each chapter, have two principal objectives. With reference to key problems and themes in social theory and, to some extent, in the social sciences generally, the intention is, first, to critically review a range of mainly contemporary theoretical and other materials that are not currently available in one book, and second, to offer a contribution to the development of social theory and to the theoretical development of sociology. With these objectives in mind it is proposed to engage in a critique of four long-standing deficient modes of social scientific thought – reductionism, essentialism, reification and functional teleology – and to develop, in part on the basis of theoretical synthesis allied to sustained critique of these four defective forms of theoretical-methodological reasoning, a set of interrelated concepts that refer, in particular, to agency–structure and social chance, and to time–space and micro–macro. The concepts and supporting ontological arguments are brought together to form an integrated theoretical and methodological framework, elements of which figure in each chapter; an overview of the framework is provided in the final chapter.

Three additional features of the book should be mentioned here. First, although concerned with social theory and in particular, sociological theory, reference will be made throughout to policy-related illustrations and applications of theoretical constructs; this will help clarify what are inevitably

rather abstract ideas, and will serve also to make the point that social theory and theoretical sociology are relevant to empirical work, including analyses of governance, politics and public policy in (post)modern society. Second, with reference to the relatively recent movement towards a 'return' to sociological theory (Mouzelis, 1991; McLennan, 1995) in the aftermath of postmodern and other rejections of social science knowledge, it is intended that the book should help stimulate a climate of renewed interest in theoretical sociology while also, as stated earlier, providing a contribution to the development of sociology as an academic discipline. Third, there is no necessary antithesis between, on the one hand, an enthusiasm for sociology and, on the other, recognition of the importance of developments in other social sciences. A theme that permeates most of the chapters is that it is desirable that there should be dialogue between theorists from different disciplines and among interdisciplinary scholars; interdisciplinary work is capable of enhancing social science's explanatory powers while also contributing to the theoretical and methodological development of individual disciplines, including sociology.

Rethinking Social Theory is, then, primarily addressed to scholars and advanced students in social theory and in sociology, though it is anticipated that some of the concepts and concerns discussed in the book will also be of interest to readers whose main disciplines are, for example, political science, policy studies and social geography, as well as those whose social science commitments include interdisciplinary activities.

Introduction

The Legacy of Four Cardinal Sins

Criticisms of sociology's explanatory and emancipatory failures took a fashionable but often theoretically crude turn (Strinati, 1993) in the 1980s when a number of writers – including postmodern critics such as Baudrillard (1983: 4) and others who will be referred to in the following chapter – rejected efforts to further the intellectual development of sociology as an academic discipline; it was argued that any such efforts are misplaced, and to some it seemed that the future of the discipline itself was in doubt. In a paper entitled 'The collapse of British sociology?', Philip Abrams (1981: 53) reported a sense that sociology in Britain was facing 'impending disaster' and that 'we might … expect to see a withering away of sociology before too long'. Some years previously, Horowitz (1964: 3) had claimed that sociology in the 1940s and 1950s had degenerated into what he described as a cul de sac. In his *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1971) Gouldner had forecast a distinctly gloomy picture, as did Seidman a quarter of a century later; Seidman argued that sociology, particularly sociological theory, was on the edge of a major crisis (1994: 2). As Bottomore (1984: 12) has observed, the history of sociology is littered with pronouncements that the discipline is 'in crisis' and on the brink of terminal decline. Mostly, these predate the postmodern genre (Smart, 1990: 397). On the whole, such claims tend to be overdone. Undoubtedly, contemporary theoretical sociology has been in the doldrums (see Gibbs, 1989: 11; White, 1992: 3; Holmwood, 1996: 1–3). A factor in this state of affairs was noted by May (1993: 558): 'the modernity/postmodernity debate … has currently ground to a halt'. But even if May's judgement, a judgement which writers such as, for example, Turner

(1994) have challenged, is accepted as accurate, this does not signal the end of sociology. To the contrary, there are grounds for feeling confident about the future of the discipline. The situation of sociology has changed for the better (Bryant, 1995: 156) since the early 1980s when Abrams had spoken of a 'withering away' of the discipline.[1] At the present time, despite undoubted difficulties, a major drive towards a post-postmodern 'return' to sociological theory and method (McLennan, 1995) seems both feasible and desirable (Archer, 1995; 2000; Mouzelis, 1995; Stones, 1996; Ritzer, 2000; Turner and Rojek, 2001).

Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether the term 'crisis' tends to be overused, it can be argued that many of sociology's undoubted problems of theory and of explanatory failure – as well as problems in general social theory – have been associated with an unfortunate tendency to draw, explicitly or not, upon one or more of four long-standing forms of deficient reasoning that in various ways continue to plague social theory and the social sciences; these four 'cardinal sins'[2] are reductionism, essentialism, reification and functional teleology in the specific terms that they are defined below.[3]

Reductionism

A *reductionist* theory is one that illegitimately attempts to reduce the complexities of social life to a single, unifying principle of explanation or analytical prime mover (Hindess, 1986a; 1988) such as 'the interests of capitalism', 'patriarchy', 'rational choice', 'the risk society', 'trust', 'the information society', 'globalization', or whatever. For example, in accounts of government and the policy process, conventional theories of the state (theories such as pluralism, elitism, corporatism, or Marxism) are reductionist in so far as each of them is predicated on the view that government and public policy can be reduced to a single substantive principle of explanation. A feature of reductionist, general theories of this kind is their ontological inflexibility; each of the theories rests on a priori assumptions about the nature of the state and of society in regard to factors affecting the distribution of power, and in regard to the nature of political and policy dynamics. A more adequate and empirically sensitive form of enquiry would recognize that some policy sectors (education, health, foreign policy, agriculture, trade and industry, social services, and so on) may be pluralist whereas others are dominated by policy networks that have an elitist or corporatist form; moreover, power distributions and policy dynamics within each sector may shift over time, or at any given moment in time they may vary spatially (James, 1997). Thus in the present example

we may conclude that rather than employ any of the above reductionist theories of the state, a better understanding of the complexities of politics, power, and public policy is likely to be gained through the use of non-reductionist, ontologically flexible methods of investigation such as, for example, policy network analysis (Rhodes, 1997; Marsh, 1998; Marsh and Smith, 2000) which is a contemporary political science approach that will be referred to in various places throughout the book. Arising from these remarks, three general aspects of anti-reductionism should be clarified at the outset. First, to reject a priori theoretical commitment to analytical prime movers is not to say there are never situations where a very small number of factors (or perhaps only one) may have causal primacy; this, however, should be treated as an empirical question rather than as something that, in advance of empirical enquiry, is theoretically predetermined on the basis of some reductionist social theory. Relatedly, it is not suggested that a substantive theory should, in 'grand theory' fashion,[4] attempt to encompass all the possible factors that may shape the phenomena under investigation; every worthwhile substantive theory is partial in terms of the type and number of phenomena to be explained and the range of explanatory variables addressed (Sibeon, 1999a). Second, there is a difference between non-reductive multi-factorial explanation, and what I term 'compounded reductionism'. The latter involves attempts to combine or synthesize two or more reductionisms (which by definition are mutually exclusive); attempts such as Dominelli's (1997) to combine two or more reductionist theories (of capitalism and of patriarchy, for example), result in theoretical contradiction and explanatory failure (a policy-related discussion of this is found in Sibeon, 1999c). Third, care should be taken to avoid what I term 'deferred reductionism'. This takes an Althusserian-like form where reductionist explanation is not removed from social analysis, but rather, is postponed or deferred until 'the last instance': straightforward or 'obvious' reductionism is replaced by a seemingly non-reductionist and multi-factorial approach that, however, turns out to have a single-order, reductionist theory at its base. An example is Farganis's feminist critique of postmodern theory. Farganis acknowledges that social class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality are important dimensions of social existence, but then goes on to argue that, in the final analysis ('in the last instance'), it will always be the case that gender is the ultimate or primary axis of social life (1994: 15–16). Another example is Harvey's attempt to blend Marxism with postmodernism: despite his postmodern-sounding caveats that refer to contingency and multidimensionality, it is clear that for Harvey the social is animated by a 'prime mover', namely, the mode of production (1989: 107) and what Harvey regards as its 'characteristic' pattern of social relations (1990: 418).

Essentialism

Essentialism is a form of theorizing that in a prioristic fashion presupposes a unity or homogeneity of social phenomena, such as the law or some other social institution, or taxonomic collectivities such as 'women', 'men', 'the working class', 'black people', or 'white people'. While it is inescapable that we have to engage in a certain amount of hypostatization and idealization of phenomena in order to be able to refer to them at all, we should not falsely essentialize them or theoretically ascribe to them more homogeneity than they actually possess. Essentialist reasoning does not regard the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity of social phenomena as an empirical variable for investigation, but rather, presupposes on theoretical or political grounds[5] a 'necessary' unitaryness of the phenomena in question; see, for instance, Albrow's useful criticisms (1996: 91–2, 94–5) of essentialist notions of 'globalization'. Very often, essentialist thinking is linked to or is a corollary of a reductionist theory (indeed, it tends to be reductionism that underpins or nurtures the other illicit forms of reasoning identified in this introductory chapter); and like reductionism, essentialism sometimes takes a disguised, tacit or 'last instance' form, as when, say, 'the working class' or 'women' are said to be social categories that, though perhaps acknowledged to be in some respects internally divided and cross-related to other categories, should nevertheless be regarded, for theoretical or political reasons, as ultimately possessing a primary, overriding commonality that transcends all other affiliations or category memberships. Against essentialism, it can be argued that where unitaryness is found to be a feature of any social phenomenon, this is a contingent and emergent – and perhaps also a temporary – outcome of social processes, and not a 'necessary effect' of the social totality.

Reification

Reification is the illicit attribution of agency to entities that are not actors or agents. Problems surrounding this invalid theoretical-methodological procedure, and an alternative, non-reified conception of agency, are discussed in Chapters 2 and 5. For the moment it is sufficient to briefly sketch elements of the critique of reification that underpins some of the concepts and propositions developed later in the book. An agent or *actor*, it will be argued in Chapter 5, is an entity that in principle has the means of formulating, taking, and acting upon decisions. This non-reified definition draws upon Harré's (1981) concept of agency and Hindess's (1988: 45) 'minimal concept of actor', a concept which specifies that 'for something to be an

actor … it must be capable of reaching decisions and of acting on some of them'. On the basis of this explicitly non-reified definition, there are but two types of actors: individual human actors; and 'social actors' (Hindess, 1986a: 115) or 'supra-individuals' as Harré calls them (1981: 141). The latter are organizations (government departments such as the Home Office, private firms, professional associations, organized pressure groups, and the like); committees, such as the Cabinet or, say, a local residents' committee or tenants' association; and micro-groups, such as a household. Examples of *non-actors*, these being entities that cannot exercise agency – in other words, entities that, in principle, do not have the means of formulating and taking decisions and of acting on at least some of them – are 'society', 'the state', social movements, and taxonomic collectivities such as 'the middle class', 'British people', 'heterosexuals', 'young people', and so on. These entities cannot exhibit agency for the reason that they are not actors; in other words, they are entities that 'have no identifiable means of taking decisions, let alone acting on them' (Hindess, 1988: 105). This non-reified conception of agency signifies, for example, that the notion that, let us say, 'men' are an entity (an actor) that can take action to remedy gender (or any other) inequalities, is a reified, reductionist and essentialist notion that has implications for governance and public policy (Sibeon, 1997; 1999b); that is to say, in so far as agency is a factor in the production or reproduction of social structure (or 'social conditions'; see Chapters 2 and 5), it is, I suggest, incontrovertible that only actors as defined above can be said to have causal responsibility for existing social conditions, including forms of inequality, and only actors are capable of formulating and carrying out actions that reproduce or alter those conditions. As will become evident in the later chapters, reification, like the other three 'cardinal sins' identified in this Introduction, is not confined to any particular paradigm or theory; reification, in the terms that I have defined it, crops up almost everywhere across the theoretical landscape. This is indicated in the following illustrations which are drawn from widely contrasting paradigms and perspectives.

Touraine's early work on a sociology of action and his later writings on modernity contain a number of illuminating theoretical and empirical insights relating to the study of politics and social action. He is described by Delanty as a theorist who is committed to 'the return of agency' (1999: 122) to social theory. Delanty's overall assessment (1999: 122–44) of Touraine, however, seems rather too generous. Touraine's conception of agency and social action is marred by reification. For instance, in his *The Voice and the Eye*, Touraine regards 'society' as an actor (1981: 31, 59), and he claims, too, that social movements are actors (ibid.: 77). He also argues that social classes are actors (ibid.: 32): 'I am unprepared to consider any

social category whatever … as a non-actor. The working-class … is a historical actor, a suffering, fighting, thinking actor … always an actor.' A problem here that will be examined more closely in Chapter 5 is that 'society', social movements and social classes cannot legitimately be said to exhibit agency; they are not forms of agency, but rather, elements of social structure (or the 'conditions of action', see Chapters 2 and 5). In his more recent theorizing, Touraine's (1995) conception of agency and social action continues to display the tendency towards reification that featured in his earlier writings. Similarly, some of Habermas's central theoretical concepts exhibit a tendency towards reification: for example, his attribution of agency to social systems is revealed in such statements as 'Social systems regulate their exchanges with their social and natural environments by way of co-ordinated interventions into the external world' (Habermas, 1987: 159–60). There are also strong reifying tendencies in the following: Luhmann's (1982: 265) attribution of agency to what he calls autopoietic social systems; Law's (1991b: 173–4) blend of poststructuralism and translation sociology, which leads him to the view that 'an agent is a structured set of relations'; Foucault's implicit claim that it is discourses, rather than the 'subjects' who employ them, that are agents (see Danaher *et al.*, 2000: 33); and the anti-humanist notion of agency (sometimes described as 'posthuman agency' or 'material agency') in Callon (1986), Latour (1988) and, for example, in Pickering's (2001) use of poststructuralism and actor network theory which he employs in his studies of scientific knowledge and scientific practices. For Pickering and actor network theorists, the material world of nature and physical objects is said to display agency, this being a conception of agency that Jones (1996: 296) rejects – rightly so, in my view – as an 'obscure, hollow metaphysics'.

Functional teleology

Functional teleology is an invalid form of analysis involving attempts to explain the causes of social phenomena in terms of their effects, where 'effects' refers to outcomes or consequences viewed as performances of 'functions'. The point to be made here – always bearing in mind the earlier non-reified definition of actor (or agent) – is that in the absence of a demonstration of intentional and successful planning by actors somewhere, sometime, it is a teleological fallacy to attempt to explain the causes of phenomena in terms of their effects (Betts, 1986: 51). All too often, reductionist theorists – including some who subscribe to varieties of 'critical social theory' – begin with a current social or cultural item (a social practice of some kind or, say, a law, a welfare or health system, or a public policy),

then attempt to 'work backwards' and claim, without any demonstration of intentional planning by previous actors, that the item came into being 'because', in the view of the theorist, it accorded with the interests of, say, a taxonomic collectivity such as 'the upper class' or 'white people' or 'men'. Related to this neglect of agency and, as will become clearer in later chapters, to a number of simplistic conceptions of the relation of agency to social structure and to power, interests and social chance, teleology is flawed by a problem of logic in so far as the factors ('causes') that bring a social or cultural item into being must necessarily predate the existence of that item, whereas effects or consequences can, of course, only occur in respect of an item that is already in existence. Although Durkheim in some of his substantive work was guilty of engaging in a certain amount of functional teleology, he was nevertheless aware, in parts of his methodological writings, of the importance of, as he saw it, separating causal explanation from functionalist explanation (Durkheim, 1982: 90, 95). Durkheim argued that it is necessary in sociological enquiry to distinguish between the *causes* of something (the factors which bring a social or cultural item – such as religion or a cultural belief system – into existence in the first place), and the *functions* of something (the functional consequences of that item for the social system, once the item has come into existence). Illegitimate functionalist teleology conflates causal and functionalist explanation and attempts to explain the cause of an item in terms of the item's 'functions', that is, in terms of the item's consequences or effects where these are understood in terms of the item fulfilling a system 'need'.[6] Functionalist teleology occurs when, for instance, particular marriages are explained in terms of a societal or system 'need' for the reproduction of marriage as a social institution; this, however, is rather like claiming that two people got married *in order to* reproduce marriage as an institution (or that they later divorced *in order to* undermine the institution of marriage)!

At various points throughout the book it will be demonstrated that the four 'cardinal sins' – reductionism, essentialism, reification and functional teleology in the terms defined above – have permeated large areas of 'modern' and 'postmodern' social theory and continue to influence sociology and other social sciences. It is important to emphasize quite strongly that these four problematical modes of theoretical and methodological thought are not only a part of the intellectual history of the social sciences: in a variety of guises – and despite, as will be noted in later chapters, some contemporary theorists' partially successful efforts to avoid them – these ways of thinking, quite often in unnoticed ways, continue to influence social theory and method. One of this book's themes is that the future development of social theory and of sociology, as well as progress in developing the explanatory potential of other social sciences, requires that the defective forms of

theoretical and methodological reasoning outlined in this Introduction should, given their apparent resilience and continuing influence, be subjected to sustained critique. The form of critical analysis envisioned here is not an exercise that offers no positive alternatives in place of that which is being criticized; critique of the four 'cardinal sins' is employed in this book as the basis for setting out a number of interrelated concepts and postulates that, it is argued, are capable of contributing to the development of sociological theory and method. The intention in what follows is to draw quite extensively on the work of some leading contemporary sociological theorists such as Margaret Archer, Nicos Mouzelis and Derek Layder (though in places it will also be necessary to criticize aspects of the approaches adopted by these writers). It will be shown, also, that there is no reason to remain exclusively within the ambit of the more 'mainstream' theoretical schools; lesser-known writers such as Roberto Unger and his work on 'formative contexts', the conceptualizations associated with, for example, translation sociology/actor network theory, and theory relating to time–space and material diffusion, have much to contribute to the future development of social theory and of sociology and other social science disciplines.

In the first chapter a number of metatheoretical concerns will be examined with particular reference to sociological discourse and its relation to other disciplines and to the wider society, and with reference to postmodern theory, theoretical pluralism, and controversy surrounding the idea of synthesis; it will be argued that metatheory is indispensable to social enquiry and that there are advantages to be gained from an epistemology which specifies that metatheory, substantive theory, methodology and empirical data should be consistent with each other and should regulate each other (Archer, 1995; Layder, 1998a). In Chapter 2 the main topics are agency–structure and micro–macro: it will be argued that these dualisms are perennial but also contemporary problematics in social theory and the social sciences, and that theories which emphasize only one aspect of a dualism, or else which attempt to abandon the idea of dualism altogether, are seriously flawed. Chapter 3 will critically evaluate some major theoretical initiatives that have arisen out of efforts to address the theoretical problems and disputes identified in the preceding chapter, and this is taken further in Chapter 4 with particular reference to the writings of Archer, Mouzelis, and Layder. In Chapter 5 the arguments that were set out earlier in the book are developed in greater depth and with particular emphasis being placed on, first, the dialectics of agency, structure, and social chance, and second, controversies surrounding conceptions of 'power' and 'interests'. Time–space is the focus of attention in Chapter 6. Here, attention shifts to neglected

dimensions of social reality that relate to temporality and, in particular, to spatiality; one of the arguments developed in the chapter is that social network analysis and the study of materials and material diffusion processes are significant areas for future development in the social sciences. Chapter 7 draws together the concepts and postulates that figured in the earlier chapters and provides an overview of a multi-level (meta)theoretical and methodological framework that is ontologically flexible and epistemologically pluralist.

Notes

1 Although Bryant (1995: 151–62) is far from complacent about the conceptual and political difficulties that confront sociology, he observes (ibid.: 156): 'British Sociology is … in better shape than seemed possible in the early 1980s'. In America, Ritzer similarly describes (2000: xix) a revival of interest in sociology and, in particular, he refers to the vibrancy of current debates in theoretical sociology. It seems likely that the current renewal of academic interest in sociological theory and theoretical social science will continue into the foreseeable future (Albrow, 1999; Calhoun *et al.*, 2002; Sharrock *et al.*, 2003).

2 This expression, not one of my making, originated at a conference where participants suggested my approach to sociological theory (Sibeon, 1999a) rested partly on identification of four 'cardinal sins' of theoretical-methodological reasoning; the term was subsequently taken up in Thompson's (2000: 38) commentary on my line of argument, and I am content to continue using what seems to be an apt description of four defective forms of reasoning that, either singly or in combination, have in my opinion been major (meta)theoretical sources of explanatory failure in social theory and the social sciences.

3 Not all theorists define each of these constructs in the exact terms set out here (DiMaggio, 1997). For example, the expression *essentialism* is sometimes used in a way that comes close to my definition of reductionism; this is evident in, for instance, Miller's (1993: 695) critique of Durkheim and Montesquieu. For other theorists, such as Mouzelis (1995: 181), essentialism refers to the failure to perceive the socially constructed nature of social phenomena (see also the discussion in Sayer, 1997). *Reification* for some authors, such as Layder (1994: 31–2), refers to a mistaken assumption that society has 'a life of its own' and exists independently of social action, which is not quite the same as regarding reification as the illegitimate attribution of agency to entities that, in principle, have no means of formulating, taking, and acting upon decisions.

4 'Grand theories', such as Parsonian structural-functionalism and Marxism, attempt to explain the historical and present-day totality of social behaviour and social structure. Another way of putting this is to say that grand theories overgeneralize: they produce large, sweeping generalizations that bear little relation to concrete empirical happenings in particular times and particular places. Although theoretical generalizations are not illegitimate, indeed, they are unavoidable in social science, one of this book's arguments is that they should be of modest scope,

and provisional. 'Grand' theories, as Mouzelis (1995: 34) observes, 'tend to be either inconclusive (holding only in certain conditions not specified by the theory) or trivial'.

5 Essentialism, in the terms defined here, may be invoked for political rather than purely theoretical or ontological reasons. Sometimes this results in theoretical contradiction: an instance is where essentialist theorizing, by virtue of its essentialism, is acknowledged to have no empirical explanatory value, but is nevertheless said to be justified in terms of a 'theory of practice' that is felt to be necessary to the realization of some political or ethical objective. Within feminism, it has been argued, for example, by Spivak who employs a notion of 'strategic essentialism', that while reductionist and essentialist conceptions of the social category 'women' have no empirical or theoretical legitimacy, feminist use of reductionist and essentialist concepts is nevertheless justified for tactical, political reasons:

> It is not possible … to … escape … essentialism or essentialization … In … critical practice, you have to be aware that you are going to essentialize anyway … strategically you can look at essentializations not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of things. (Spivak, 1990, cited in Clough, 1994: 116)

The idea of 'strategic essentialism' is, it can be argued, not only analytically redundant but also politically and programmtically self-defeating (Sibeon, 1999c; Thompson, 2000).

6 'Functions' and 'consequences' are not synonymous; the former refers to consequences that are presumed to be the fulfilment of some system need (or 'functional prerequisite'), whereas the latter makes no such presumption. An example of a system need (such needs may be regarded as 'conditions of existence') in the case of, say, factories might be that factories as ongoing social systems require, for their continued survival as systems, a mechanism for recruiting and training new members of staff.

It can be argued, and here I am adapting Mouzelis's defence of Mertonian functionalism (for example, Mouzelis, 1995: 132–3), that despite the controversy surrounding functionalism, it is legitimate to engage in (non-teleological) functionalist investigation of the conditions-of-existence (system needs) of a social system or a social whole, providing the following methodological principles are adhered to. First, a distinction between causal and functionalist explanation should be preserved, the latter being incorporated into analysis when the focus of enquiry is the conditions of existence of social phenomena and their implications for social action. Second, in non-teleological functionalist analyses it is important to distinguish 'necessary conditions' of existence of social phenomena from 'sufficient causes'. For instance, in the above example a recruitment and training mechanism can be thought of as a 'necessary' device that satisfies factories' (systemic) need for some mechanism that is suitable for replacing and training staff. But this explanation refers to factories *in general* and goes only some way towards providing an adequate account of any *particular* recruitment/training mechanism within *a* factory; here, a 'sufficient' explanation would have to relate analysis of general systemic 'needs' to a more detailed, contextual analysis of local factors – including, crucially the operation of agency – that shape recruitment/training mechanisms in specific locations. Third, and this relates closely to the last point, employing both *social*

integration and *system integration* modes of analysis, and exploring links between them (see Chapter 3), facilitates investigation of the ways in which the conditions of existence of social phenomena are satisfied (or not, as the case may be), while ensuring that the significance of agency – which tends to be ignored in teleological functionalist theories that emphasize the *consequences* of action while downplaying actors' *reasons* for action – is not lost sight of.

1

Metatheoretical Preliminaries

Without entering into unnecessarily detailed debate of the philosophy of social scientific explanation, the aim of this first chapter is to provisionally outline the part that metatheoretical reflection plays in the social sciences generally and in the construction of the sociological concepts and postulates that figure later in the book. Following a brief statement of the rationale for employing metatheoretical concepts in the social sciences, there is a discussion of the relation of sociological discourse to other discourses and to the wider society. This is followed by a review of controversies surrounding postmodern rejection of theoretical foundations, and an account of theoretical pluralism and cumulative sociology. The chapter ends with an argument in favour of theoretical synthesis as a procedure that is capable of aiding the theoretical and methodological development of sociology as an academic discipline.

Metatheory

One of the first points to make here is that in the social sciences it is appropriate to distinguish between theory (sometimes referred to as substantive theory) consisting of propositions that are intended to furnish information about the social world, and *metatheory*, which is not primarily or directly concerned with specific explanatory problems or with generating new empirical knowledge but with matters of a more general kind relating to ontology, epistemology, and methodology.[1] Metatheory, some aspects of which were touched upon in the Introduction in connection with critique

of the four 'cardinal sins', is intended to inform and hopefully improve the construction of substantive theories and the design of empirical studies. Metatheorists are largely concerned with ontological questions, including the following. What, in general terms, is 'society'? What sorts of things exist in the social world? If there are such things as actors or agents, what sort of things are they? Are activities and society indivisible ('two sides of the same coin') and so tightly melded together that (as claimed in doctrines of ontological duality) it is impossible to separate them? Does it make sense to employ a stratified social ontology that refers to micro and macro spheres or 'levels' of society, or is micro–macro – as Foucault, Elias, and Giddens claim – a spurious and misleading distinction? And when we turn to epistemology, it is important to ask: how is reliable knowledge acquired? Is, for example, 'lay' actors' self-experience a better guide to social reality than the supposedly 'objective' perspective of the social analyst? Indeed, a perhaps more fundamental question is whether there is an objective social reality that exists 'out there' independent of our conception of it: maybe there are no 'real' things in the social world, but only words (that is, the names of things)? These kinds of questions, which do not refer directly to specific empirical explanatory problems in the way that substantive theories do, are the stuff of metatheory and of metatheoretical concepts such as 'agency–structure', 'micro–macro' and 'time–space'. Sometimes the expression *sensitizing theory* is used in place of the term metatheory. Sensitizing (or meta-) theory can and should inform the construction of substantive theories, but we have seen that the two types are distinct. In the social sciences substantive theories aim to generate new empirical information about the social world, whereas meta- or sensitizing theories and concepts are concerned with general ontological and epistemological understandings; metatheories and meta-concepts are designed to equip us with a general sense of the kinds of things that exist in the social world, and with ways of thinking about the question of how we might 'know' that world. Of relevance here is Mouzelis's parallel distinction between substantive generalizations and methodological generalizations; in regard to the latter, which are akin to metatheoretical concepts, Mouzelis (1993a: 684) notes that 'their aim is less to tell us things we do not know about the social than to provide us with conceptual tools for asking interesting questions and preparing the ground for the empirical investigation of the social world'. In short, the job of metatheoretical concepts is to generate, at the meta-level, conceptual tools that inform the development of concepts, substantive theories and explanatory schemes, and that underpin the design of empirical studies. This does not mean, as we shall see later, that meta-concepts and metatheories should be regarded as immune from theoretical and empirical sources of revision.

Not all researchers and theorists are happy with the idea of metatheory. Postmodernists tend, mistakenly in my view, to reject metatheory on the grounds that it is a form of 'grand narrative' (Lyotard, 1986) or 'grand theory'. It is true that some meta- or sensitizing theories formulate 'large' generalizations pertaining to common social processes that may be found in a wide variety of social settings. For example, Giddens's (1989: 295) structuration theory, which is one of the better-known examples of metatheory, consists of postulates that 'are intended to apply over the whole range of human social activity, in any and every context of action'. *Meta*theoretical generalizations of this kind, however, are not the same thing as universal ('grand') generalizations associated with reductionist substantive theories such as Marxism, rational choice theory, and radical feminism, theories which are rightly criticized by postmodernists; see, for example, the criticisms by Nicholson and Seidman (1995: 7). In contrast to such theories, Giddens's structuration theory is an example of a sensitizing or metatheory that does not invoke the reductionism associated with 'grand' substantive theories, such as radical feminism which simplistically reduces the complexity of social relations to the notion of patriarchy; structuration theory is ontologically flexible (Cohen, 1987: 279–80, 285, 289, 291), a term that refers to metatheory of a kind which leaves the door open for the development of a wide range of perhaps competing substantive theories, and for relatively open-ended empirical investigation and empirical interpretation that involve no commitment to explanations that rely on generalizations of the kind associated with reductionist substantive theories. Here it is worth noting that Holmwood's criticism of metatheory, which he associates with 'grand theory', is grounded not in postmodernism but in a commitment to a pragmatic sociology that develops theory only in relation to, and as an integral part of, practical empirical research activity (1996: 133). There are three problems associated with Holmwood's rejection (1996: viii, 31–2) of metatheory *per se*. First, what Holmwood does not allow for is that there are helpful as well as inadequate metatheoretical schemes. Those that he criticizes – which build upon versions of Parsonian structural-functionalism, Marxism, and postmodernism – have in common the characteristic that they are prone to one or more of the 'cardinal sins' that were outlined in the Introduction; but as this book is designed to demonstrate, not all metatheory or metatheoretical concepts are of the kind described by Holmwood. Second, in response to Holmwood's (1996: 47–8) justifiable criticism of Jeffrey Alexander's preference for the independence of 'theoretical logic' from empirical sources of revision, there is no reason why immunity from empirically based scrutiny should be sought for metatheory; later in the chapter it will be argued that metatheory, (substantive) theory, and empirical data should regulate or modify each other. Third,

Holmwood does not seem to appreciate that metatheoretical suppositions of one kind or another are *unavoidable* in substantive theory and in empirical explanatory work (see Archer, 1995: 12); far better, then, rather than allow metatheoretical assumptions to influence sociological enquiry in hidden or unacknowledged ways, to make such assumptions explicit and available to the critical scrutiny of others (Ritzer, 1992; 2001). Paradoxically, given Holmwood's (Holmwood and Stewart, 1983) quest to avoid theoretical (as distinct from empirical) contradictions, explicit metatheoretical reflection concerned with social ontology is, as Archer (1998) observed, a way of helping to avoid the tacit importation of theoretical contradictions into substantive explanatory schemes; this will be discussed later in the chapter.

The relation of sociological discourse to other discourses and to the wider society

Postmodern theorists deny that sociological discourse or other disciplinary discourses can have validity (Baudrillard, 1983: 4). It therefore becomes necessary – if one wishes to employ metatheoretical arguments in support of sociological theory as a disciplinary activity, and if, more generally, one wishes to endorse the legitimacy of the idea of disciplinary knowledge – to address the emergence of postmodern theory as a body of thought that challenges the very notion of social science and rejects disciplinary knowledge of the kind associated with, for example, sociology, economics, political science, public administration, and psychology. Within the space available, the intention is to focus only on those aspects of postmodernism that relate to the central concerns of the book as a whole. Reference will be restricted to what might be termed poststructural postmodernism (Baudrillard, 1983; Lyotard, 1986), and for present purposes poststructural and postmodern approaches will be regarded as broadly similar. Hence the discussion that follows is not primarily concerned with those versions of postmodern thought that draw upon Marxism (such as Jameson, 1991, and Harvey, 1989) or versions which argue in non-Marxist terms that we live in a postmodern type of society (see the useful discussion in Lyon, 1994, and Kumar, 1995).

Postmodernism as a *type of theory*, as distinct from the idea of the postmodern as historical periodization and as a *type of society*, rejects the generalizations and nomothetic knowledge that characterize social science, and instead favours small-scale, particularistic or ideographic 'narratives' (Dickens, 1990: 105). Postmodern theorists also adopt a relativism which supposes that all perspectives or theories – such as lay and academic perspectives, religious, political, and professional discourses – have in