

understanding
social theory

second edition



Derek Layder



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Preface

The reader of this second edition may wish to know in what respects it differs from the first edition. Since it was originally published (1994) there have been some developments in social theory that relate to the central themes of the book and I have incorporated some reference to them in this new edition. Also, in the intervening years I have changed some of my views as they appear in the earlier book so I have taken the opportunity to amend or reformulate some of the ideas expressed in it. The practical impact of these changes is as follows. What was originally the final chapter (12) has disappeared from this new edition, although substantial parts of it have been redistributed to other chapters in the second edition (specifically Chapters 7, 8, 10 and 11). I have repositioned Chapters 10 and 11. The 'old' Chapter 11 on Habermas now appears as Chapter 10, while Chapter 10 has become Chapter 11 in this new edition. This was necessitated because I have added new material to what is now Chapter 11 (and also re-titled it 'Varieties of Dualism'). Now joining the original discussions of Goffman and Turner are additional commentaries on Mouzelis and Archer. These changes make for a much smoother transition to the issues discussed in the new final chapter (12).

The new Chapter 12, entitled 'New Directions: The Theory of Social Domains', provides a more definite conclusion than did the original, which was somewhat tentative and speculative. My own work on social theory and social research strategies was only at the mid-point of its development when the first edition was published so I largely refrained from referring to it in that book. However, my work on the 'theory of social domains' and 'adaptive theory' has subsequently acquired a more fully developed form and so I have taken the opportunity to organise the concluding chapter largely around themes and issues deriving from this work. Of course, many of the authors and perspectives dealt with in the foregoing chapters arise as topics of discussion in this new chapter, and so it serves both as a conclusion to the book as a whole and an introduction to alternative ideas and new directions for social theory. Since my own ideas focus centrally on issues relating to the dualisms of individual–society, agency–structure and macro–micro, the final section of Chapter 12 ties the discussion back to the central organising themes of the book as a whole.

Apart from these 'major' alterations, throughout the whole text I have made minor amendments, revisions and refreshments to the discussion where I have thought appropriate and they reflect the way in which my views have changed since the first edition. There are two other significant changes to the original. Every chapter now has a 'preview' at the beginning and a 'summary' at the end which provide overviews of the topics and issues as they appear in the chapter concerned. I have also added a 'glossary' of the main social theory terms and concepts that recur throughout the text. Hopefully these two additions make the book (even) more reader-friendly than the first edition. Finally, I'd like to thank Chris Rojek at Sage (and the Sage staff generally) for suggesting a second edition. The more I have thought about and worked on this project, the more convinced I have become that the changes it has enabled me to make are both necessary and important.

Derek Layder 2004

Preface to the First Edition

This book is an introduction to key issues in modern social theory. Although it does give a general overview of social theory it does not sacrifice depth of analysis in an attempt to cover absolutely every topic. Rather, it concentrates on the work of major authors, perspectives and key issues in social theory. I believe that although there can be no eventual great synthesis in social theory, there are, nonetheless, many different strands which can be usefully drawn together. Thus, while not underestimating the obstacles and incompatibilities, I stress the unities and points of connection in social theory. This moves away from the idea that social theory is necessarily diverse and irredeemably fragmented. I think that the only way forward is to stress the cumulative nature of sociological knowledge and the co-operative dialogue of those involved in its production.

I have tried to emphasise the empirical and social research implications of the theoretical issues that I raise. My guiding assumption is that theory is never completely isolated from problems of empirical research, any more than empirical research is free from theoretical assumptions. The really interesting questions concern the nature of the relations between theory and empirical research and not whether either domain has some divinely given priority. Similarly, I do not think that sociology is beleaguered by 'false' problems and divisions (such as those expressed in the pairings of 'individual and society', 'agency–structure' and 'macro–micro'). In my opinion these dualisms represent not so much false problems as contested issues about which are the most adequate ways of thinking about the interconnections between different features of social life. The most enlivening and important questions facing social theory today are concerned with *how* different aspects of social reality are related to each other. Both classical and contemporary theorists have produced an interesting diversity of answers to these questions. It is the sorting through of competing and complementary claims in the search for sound and adequate solutions that provides much of the creative impetus, excitement and controversy in modern social theory.

I would like to thank Karen Phillips of Sage for her patience, help and constructive advice throughout the writing of this book. Also, two anonymous reviewers from Sage were instrumental in defining the form and content of the book prior to writing. I thank them for this and their subsequent perceptive and useful comments on a completed draft of the book. I owe a lot to Alison Drewett, who went through the manuscript in great detail. Although I have not incorporated absolutely everything she suggested, I found her observations to be invaluable.

While not directly involved in the writing of this book, a number of people have generally influenced my thinking about social theory and I would like to acknowledge them here. Paul Secord of the University of Houston and John Wilson of Duke University have over the years provided collegial support and enthusiasm. Stewart Clegg's influence has been both practical and intellectual and, although he may be unaware of it, he bears some responsibility for broadening my theoretical horizons! I also learned much from Tony Giddens while writing a previous book.

David Ashton has always provided important support and helpful advice. In particular our collaboration on an article that combined theory and empirical research stimulated my thinking about crucial aspects of the macro–micro problem. Conversations with William Watson and Simon Locke always proved to be productive and stimulating. Also, I would like to thank the students who attended my sociological theory lectures at the University of Leicester between 1986–91. They provided an extremely inquisitive and attentive audience and 'sounding board' for many of my views. Finally, I wish to thank Julia O'Connell Davidson, John Williams, Dominic Strinati, James Fulcher, Stephen Small, Steve Wagg, Terry Johnson and John Scott – all colleagues at Leicester – for their friendship, but above all for their sense of humour.

Those who wish to obtain a full picture of the overall argument are encouraged to read the book straight through. However, those who wish to dip into it to gain an impression of a particular author's main ideas or to obtain a preliminary understanding of a particular perspective are encouraged to do so. I have tried to help in this respect by making each chapter fairly self-contained. However, before plundering various parts of the book it is probably best to read Chapter 1 first, since this defines key terms and themes and gives an outline of the chapter contents.

A Map of the Terrain: The Organisation of the Book

The Main Story: Key Dualisms in Sociology

This book provides an overview of the major issues in social theory but the organisation of the discussion is unlike that found in most textbooks. Instead of presenting the discussion in the form of a list of issues or authors in social theory, this book is organised around a central theme and problem-focus. This concerns how the encounters of everyday life and individual behaviour influence, and are influenced by, the wider social environment in which we live. The book explores this basic theme in terms of three dualisms which play a key part in sociology; individual–society, agency–structure and macro–micro. These three dualisms are all closely related and may be regarded as different ways of expressing and dealing with the basic theme and problem-focus of the book. The dualisms are not simply analytic distinctions – they refer to different aspects of social life which can also be empirically defined. It is important not to lose sight of this fundamental truth since the sociological problems they pose cannot be solved solely in theoretical terms any more than they can by exclusively empirical means. In this sense, both empirical research and ‘theorising’ must go hand in hand (see Layder, 1993, for an extended argument).

Some authors have suggested that the dualisms that abound in sociology – and there are quite a few others that I have not yet mentioned – express divisions between separate and opposing entities that are locked in a struggle with each other for dominance. These authors object to this because they believe that social

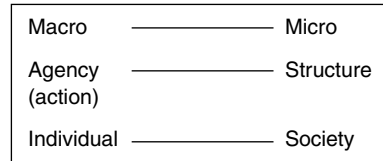


Figure 1.1 *Three key dualisms*

life is an interwoven whole in which all elements play a part in an ongoing flux of social activity. Dualism, on this view, is simply a false doctrine that leads to misleading and unhelpful distinctions which do not actually exist in reality.

However, I would side with those theorists who suggest that sociological dualism must not be understood as inherently tied to such a view. The entities referred to in the dualisms must not be thought to be always separate and opposed to each other in some antagonistic manner. Whether or not they are thought of in this way will depend upon which authors or schools of thought we are dealing with. But we must recognise that some authors see dualisms as referring to different aspects of social life which are inextricably interrelated. That is, while possessing their own characteristics, they are interlocked and interdependent features of society. In short, they mutually imply and influence each other. They are not opposed to each other in some kind of struggle for dominance.

In Figure 1.1, the individual–society dualism comes at the base of the diagram with agency–structure above it and macro–micro at the top. This is deliberately arranged to indicate that as we ascend the list we are dealing with more inclusive distinctions. To put this another way, I am saying that the macro–micro distinction comes at the top because it ‘includes’ within its terms some reference to the two underneath. So, by starting with the individual–society distinction I am dealing with the simplest and most basic dualism.

The individual–society distinction is perhaps the oldest and represents a persistent dilemma about the fitting together of individual and collective needs. This is expressed in sociological terms by the problem of how social order is created out of the rather disparate and often anti-social motivations of the many individuals who make up society. As one of the oldest dualisms in sociology, this has been rightly criticised for its tendency to see individuals as if they were completely separated from social influences. This view fails to take into account the fact that many needs and motivations that people experience are shaped by the

social environment in which they live (see Chapters 4 and 7). In this sense there is no such thing as society without the individuals who make it up just as there are no individuals existing outside of the influence of society. It has been argued, therefore, that it is better to abandon the individual–society distinction since this simply reaffirms this notion of the isolated individual (or perhaps more absurdly, society without individuals).

Now, there is some merit in the argument against the notion of the pristine individual free from social influences. Some non-sociologists still speak fondly but misguidedly of people as if they stood outside of collective forces. More importantly, some sociologists tend to view the individual's point of contact with social forces as one which is 'privatised' – a straight line of connection between the individual and the social expectations that exert an influence on his or her behaviour (see Chapters 2 and 3). In these cases it is important to view the individual as intrinsically involved with others in both immediate face-to-face situations and in terms of more remote networks of social relationships. In this sense, the individual is never free of social involvements and commitments.

However, as I shall argue throughout, it would be unwise to simply abandon the notion of the individual as 'someone' who has a subjective experience of society, and it is useful to distinguish this aspect of social life from the notion of society in its objective guise. To neglect this distinction would be to merge the individual with social forces to such an extent that the idea of unique self-identities would disappear along with the notion of 'subjective experience' as a valid category of analysis. This is a striking example of the difference between the cautionary use of dualisms, as against their misuse by the creation of false images. Thus, if the individual is not viewed as separate or isolated from other people or the rest of society, then the individual–society distinction has certain qualified uses. As I have said, one of the drawbacks of speaking of 'individuals' as such is that this very notion seems to draw attention away from the fact that people are *always* involved in social interaction and social relations. This is where the agency–structure dualism has a distinct advantage.

The agency–structure dualism is of more recent origin and derives rather more from sociology itself, although there have been definite philosophical influences, especially concerning the notion of 'agency'. In Figure 1.1 you will notice that I have put the word 'action' in brackets below the word agency. This is meant to indicate that these two words are often used interchangeably by sociologists. In many respects 'action' is superior to the word 'agency' because it more solidly

draws our attention to the socially active nature of human beings. In turn, the fact that people are actively involved in social relationships means that we are more aware of their social interdependencies. The word 'agency' points to the idea that people are 'agents' in the social world – they are able to do things which affect the social relationships in which they are embedded. People are not simply passive victims of social pressure and circumstances. Thus the notion of activity and its effects on social ties and bonds is closely associated in the terms 'action' and 'agency'.

Another advantage over the individual–society dualism is that action–structure focuses on the mutual influence of social activity and the social contexts in which it takes place. Thus it is concerned with two principal questions: first, the extent to which human beings actively create the social worlds they inhabit through their everyday social encounters. Stated in the form of a question it asks: How does human activity shape the very social circumstances in which it takes place? Secondly, the action–structure issue focuses on the way in which the social context (structures, institutions, cultural resources) moulds and forms social activity. In short, how do the social circumstances in which activity takes place make certain things possible while ruling out other things? In general terms, the action–structure distinction concentrates on the question of how creativity and constraint are related through social activity – how can we explain their coexistence?

Having said this, I have to point out that I am presenting the agency–structure issue in a form which makes most sense in terms of the overall interests and arguments of this book. That is to say, different authors use varying definitions of the two terms and understand the nature of the ties between them in rather different ways. For instance, some authors suggest that agency can be understood to be a feature of various forms of social organisation or collectivity. In this sense we could say that social classes or organisations 'act' in various ways – they are collective actors – thus the term 'agency' cannot be exclusively reserved for individuals or episodes of face-to-face interaction. In some cases and for some purposes I think it is sensible to talk of the agency of collective actors in this way, but I shall not be primarily concerned with this usage. For present purposes, the most important sense of the term 'agency' will refer to the ability of human beings to make a difference in the world (see Giddens, 1984).

Similarly, I am using the notion of structure in the conventional sense of the social relationships which provide the social context or conditions under

which people act. On this definition social organisations, institutions and cultural products (like language, knowledge and so on) are the primary referent of the term 'structure'. These refer to objective features of social life in that they are part of a pre-existing set of social arrangements that people enter into at birth and which typically endure beyond their lifetimes. Of course they also have a subjective component insofar as people enact the social routines that such arrangements imply. In this sense they are bound up with people's motivations and reasons for action. Although activity (agency) and structure are linked in this way, the primary meaning of structure for this discussion centres on its objective dimension as the social setting and context of behaviour.

There are other meanings of structure, some of which refer to rather different aspects of social life (for example Giddens defines it as 'rules and resources'), and some refer to primarily subjective or simply small-scale phenomena. I shall not be dealing with these usages in this book but this issue does highlight a difference between the agency–structure and the macro–micro dualisms. That is, whereas agency–structure can in principle refer to both large-scale and small-scale features of social life, the macro–micro distinction deals primarily with a difference in level and scale of analysis. I shall come back to this in a moment but let me just summarise what I mean by the agency–structure dualism. My definitions of these terms follow a fairly conventional distinction between people in face-to-face social interaction as compared with the wider social relations or context in which these activities are embedded. Thus the agency–structure issue focuses on the way in which human beings both create social life at the same time as they are influenced and shaped by existing social arrangements.

There are other differences in usage such as the degree of importance or emphasis that is given to either agency or structure in the theories of various authors and these will emerge as the book progresses. However, the important core of the distinction for present purposes hinges on the link between human activity and its social contexts. By contrast, the macro–micro distinction is rather more concerned with the level and scale of analysis and the research focus. Thus it distinguishes between a primary concentration on the analysis of face-to-face conduct (everyday activities, the routines of social life), as against a primary concentration on the larger scale, more impersonal macro phenomena like institutions and the distribution of power and resources. As with agency–structure, the macro–micro distinction is a matter of analytic emphasis, since both macro and micro features are intertwined and depend on each other. However, macro

and micro refer to definite levels of social reality which have rather different properties – for example, micro phenomena deal with more intimate and detailed aspects of face-to-face conduct, while macro phenomena deal with more impersonal and large-scale phenomena.

There are considerable overlaps between structures and macro phenomena, although there are important differences in emphasis. Macro phenomena tend to deal with the distribution of groups of people or resources in society as a whole, for example, the concentration of women or certain ethnic groups in particular kinds of jobs and industries, or the unequal distribution of wealth and property in terms of class and other social divisions. However, macro analyses may include structural phenomena like organisational power, or cultural resources such as language and artistic and musical forms, which may have rather more local significance. The common element in both structures and macro phenomena is that they refer to reproduced patterns of power and social organisation. There is also some overlapping between micro analysis and the concern with agency and creativity and constraint in social activity. The main difference is that micro refers primarily to a level of analysis and research focus, whereas a concern with agency focuses on the tie between activity and its social contexts.

I think we can see from these brief preliminary definitions, that not only is the individual–society problem closely related to the agency (action)–structure issue, but that both are directly implicated in the macro–micro dualism. That is, if micro analysis is concerned with face-to-face conduct, then it overlaps with self-identity and subjective experience as well as the idea that people are social agents who can fashion and remake their social circumstances. Similarly, if macro analysis concentrates on more remote, general and patterned features of society, then it also overlaps with the notion of ‘social structure’ as the regular and patterned practices (institutional and otherwise) which form the social context of behaviour. So, my point is that these different dualisms overlap with each other and that the macro–micro dualism includes elements of the other two. This is the reason that it is the principal focus of this book, although I shall have something to say about them all throughout.

As I have tried to make clear, these are not distinctions without substance. They all mean something quite definite even though they overlap to some extent. They all refer to divisions between different sorts of things in the social world, and it is important to remember that these may be complementary rather than antagonistic to each other. As mentioned earlier, some sociologists object to

the influence which these sorts of dualism have had on sociological thinking, and this is something we shall go on to consider. However, the whole point of presenting them and being clear about what they mean right from the start is that it is the only way of evaluating the arguments both for and against this point of view. We can only really understand why some sociologists have objected to them, and judge whether their arguments are sound, if we know what it is they are objecting to.

Apart from these three key dualisms there are a number of others that have played an important role in social analysis such as 'objectivism–subjectivism', 'dynamics–statics', 'materialism–idealism', 'rationalism–empiricism'. I shall not be discussing these here, I simply wish to indicate that they are fairly widespread and ingrained in routine social analysis. It is important to be aware of this because it is part of the context against which the 'rejectors' of dualism are protesting. Also, since this book is organised around the theme of the macro–micro dualism, it is important to have some sense of the wider context of dualistic thinking in the social sciences.

The Organisation of the Book

Let me now turn to the way in which the book is organised from Chapter 2 to 12. One of the main themes which group certain writers and schools of thought together is based on the extent to which they reject or affirm dualism in social theory, especially those of agency–structure and macro–micro. With regard to this basic organising principle we can see that the book is divided into four parts. Each part deals with approaches to theory which either affirm or reject these dualisms in different ways.

In Part 1, I examine the work of Talcott Parsons (Chapter 2) and the variety of theoretical work that has stemmed from the writings of Karl Marx (Chapter 3). It is often thought that the work of these authors is diametrically opposed and, to a large extent, this is true. However, there are common features in their work which become more apparent as we compare them with other approaches. One of these common features concerns their views about the role of social structural (or macro) features in the shaping of social activity. In this sense they are both 'affirmers' of dualism insofar as they make a distinction between the realm of social activity and the realm of institutions, which represent the social conditions under which such activity takes place.

However, both Parsons and Marx (and the schools of theory they gave rise to: 'functionalism' and 'Marxism'), tend to affirm dualism in a rather one-sided manner in the sense that they give priority to the macro realm in determining the form of social activity. So, despite their many political and theoretical differences, Parsons and Marx (and their later followers) are in agreement about the importance of objective social structures (Parsons prefers the term 'system') in setting the terms in which social activity is played out. It is largely for this reason that I have entitled Part 1, 'The View from on High'. This points to the fact that these authors stress the idea that the external (macro) social conditions, to varying degrees, influence the form of social action ('agency' or the 'micro world').

Although this book is primarily about modern social theory, the influence of the work of classical authors (Marx, Durkheim and Weber) on contemporary theorists is evident throughout. In Part 1 the work of Durkheim and Marx is stressed while in Part 2 the influence of Weber comes to the fore. This is because of Weber's interest in incorporating the 'subjective understanding' of the people that we, as sociologists, study into a more general analysis of social structure. Other authors have taken this interest in the micro social world to an extreme with which Weber might have felt rather uncomfortable. Thus, in Part 2 my discussion centres around those theorists who have taken subjective experience and social interaction as their focus of analysis. I have entitled Part 2 'Where the Action Is' in order to highlight this focus of interest and to contrast it with Part 1, where the micro world is subsidiary to an interest in macro features of society.

In Part 2, I deal more with schools of thought (or 'approaches' and perspectives') rather than with single authors (although particular authors are often taken as representatives of different approaches). In Chapter 4, I discuss the 'symbolic interactionist' approach, which emphasises the role of meanings, situations and experience in social life. In Chapter 5, I deal with what are known as 'phenomenological' approaches (including 'ethnomethodology'), which emphasise social life as something which is in a continual state of construction and reconstruction by the people involved. These approaches, therefore, tend to react against the priority given to macro-structural matters which is evident in the work of those theorists discussed in Part 1. In fact, they stress the opposite by suggesting that the world of social interaction and subjective experience is the only one with real importance in understanding social life. Some of these authors suggest that the macro world is simply a neutral 'background' against which the key elements

of action and meaning emerge and are enacted. Some go so far as to say that the whole notion of a macro world of social structure is simply an invention of theorists!

Thus, the authors and approaches dealt with in Part 2 could be said to be 'rejectors' of dualism in the sense that they believe that action and meaning are of paramount importance and, as a result, largely dispense with the idea of an external macro world. There is some overlap with the sociologists that I discuss in Part 3, insofar as they too reject dualism. However, those in Part 3 tend to 'reject' it for different reasons and in different ways. Even among themselves there is quite a variety of preferred approaches which hinge around different 'solutions' to the dilemmas created by dualistic thinking. Alternatively, they can be thought of as responses to dualistic forms of theory. I have called Part 3 'Breaking Free and Burning Bridges' because this suggests that the sociologists involved want to abandon completely the traditional terms of reference of social theory. Central to this aim is the rejection of philosophical dualism which views such distinctions as 'macro and micro' and 'action and structure' as if they were separate and opposed.

As indicated earlier, the idea of criticising this type of dualism is a creditable one, but it rather misses the point by implying that all sociological thought necessarily fits in with the philosophical type of dualism. However, this is something which I shall be arguing in detail throughout and here I want simply to give an overview of the general argument. Now, having said that there is an overlap with Part 2 in the sense that those in Part 3 reject dualism, I must highlight the fact that this is a somewhat different form of rejection. Those in Part 2 reject the macro–micro dualism by putting all their eggs in the one basket of the micro world of interaction – and therefore still uphold at least one term of the dualism. This contrasts with those in Part 3 who wish to reject dualism more fundamentally by abandoning any reference to either of its sides. These authors typically invent their own terms and language of social analysis, which are meant to replace the traditional dualistic forms.

Thus in Part 3, Chapter 6, I discuss Foucault, whose work can generally be understood as a response to, and ultimate rejection of, Marxism in its various guises. In particular, Foucault is against those theories which envisage society as a monolithic structure in terms of which people play preordained roles. Thus Foucault is an example of the post-structuralist movement which emphasises the localised and fragmented nature of society. Foucault is also associated with post-modernism, which overlaps with post-structuralism in its rejection of 'structural'

theories as well as those which centre their analyses around the individual 'subject'. Foucault's work thus represents an attempt to transcend what he takes to be the limitations of dualisms such as macro–micro and action–structure by analysing a 'middle ground' of social practices and how they express relations of power.

As with the other authors discussed in Part 3, Foucault makes a good deal of headway in breaking free and avoiding some of the pitfalls of more traditional ways of thinking but, by so conclusively burning the bridges that link older and newer forms of theory, he leaves much unresolved. The same is true of Elias (Chapter 7) and Giddens (Chapter 8), although I feel that Giddens allows for more continuity in this regard. While I suggest that Elias's work has much to offer in many other respects, it fails on the specific task of pulling together different strands of theory into a more adequate synthesis of macro and micro levels of analysis.

I find Giddens's 'structuration theory' to be the most persuasive and compelling attempt to move 'beyond' traditional dualistic thinking, not least because Giddens argues a detailed case in relation to existing theories even where he disagrees with them. Despite the fact that it is generally undogmatic in form, structuration theory is based on certain assumptions which prevent it from entering a dialogue with particular approaches to social theory and research. In this respect, Giddens's theory tends to insulate itself from those approaches (discussed in Chapters 11 and 12) which suggest that there are social structures and systems which exist to some extent independently of the motivations and reasons that people give for their conduct. I argue throughout that there needs to be dialogue between this kind of 'objectivist' theory and those which concentrate on the form and dynamics of social behaviour. Such a dialogue cannot take place if we prematurely reject certain aspects of dualistic thought in sociology. This brings us to Part 4 in which I discuss the work of other contemporary theorists who tend to 'affirm' dualism by attempting to forge links between the different domains. Obviously, this is a very different strategy from that adopted by those in Part 3 who wish to abandon dualism root and branch.

To some extent, this theme of linking agency and structure and macro and micro domains connects with the discussion in Part 1. However, the crucial difference in Part 4 is that it is not assumed that agency or micro elements are of only subsidiary importance. Most contemporary theorists who affirm dualism do so by stressing that agency and structure and macro and micro domains are of equal importance. Thus I begin Chapter 9 with a brief discussion of Bourdieu's

attempt to link objective and subjective aspects of social life in a theory of social practice. I follow this with a rather more detailed analysis of the work of Dorothy Smith. This is an example of feminist theorising which attempts to understand the links between macro and micro features of social life from the viewpoint of women. In a sense, both Bourdieu and Smith are ambiguous on the dualism issue. While they wish to overcome the opposition entailed in philosophical dualism, they both seem to stress the links between definite domains of social life.

However, there are some who, while acknowledging the existence and importance of both domains, either insist on, or at least tend to assume, the primary importance of one or the other. The work of Alexander and Munch (also Chapter 9) is interesting for its bold assertion of the importance of objective and collective aspects of social life. However, while they both recognise the necessity of integrating macro and micro elements, their work tends to veer towards the macro side. This is perhaps an inevitable result of their commitment to the theoretical programme initiated by Talcott Parsons. Randall Collins (also Chapter 9) is an example of a theorist who formally acknowledges the importance of both macro and micro domains but who goes on to suggest that the macro domain can be explained in micro terms. Collins has important things to say about the dynamics of interaction, but I agree with the other writers discussed in Part 4 who insist that macro and micro phenomena cannot be reduced to one side of the dualism or the other.

In Chapter 10, I discuss Habermas's ideas about the relationship between the 'lifeworld' and 'system'. Habermas's views on the 'colonisation' of the lifeworld by system elements brings sharply into relief the question of the interpenetration of agency and structure and macro and micro domains. It also brings back a concern with a critical theory of society as an essential ingredient of social analysis in general. In Chapter 11, I examine the work of four authors (Erving Goffman, Jonathan Turner, Nicos Mouzelis and Margaret Archer), all of whom support dualism in some guise or other. However, it is important to stress that each of these authors has very different views on the nature of dualism and the sorts of social analysis they support. Thus they represent a diversity of views on the best overall framework for understanding the interconnections between agency and structure and macro and micro dimensions of social reality. In the final chapter I discuss my own contribution to the debate in the form of the 'theory of social domains'. Clearly, much of what I say about domain theory is consistent with the views of those authors discussed in Chapters 9, 10 and 11.

However, there are certain crucial respects in which domain theory takes its own distinct direction and form. In particular it suggests that social theory and analysis should take the next crucial step beyond 'analytic dualism' and understand social reality as a complex unity of the influences of four principal domains of social reality. While these social domains are distinct from and partly independent of each other, they are at the same time closely interlinked and mutually influential.



part one



**the view from
on high**

The Legacy of Talcott Parsons

PREVIEW

- The influence and legacy of the work of Talcott Parsons on sociological thought.
 - The social system, its sub-systems and their functional 'needs'.
 - Individuals, social roles and the pattern variables.
 - The problems of determinism, over-conformity and social harmony in Parsons's analyses.
 - Critical issues around social inequality, material interests, power and ideology.
 - The problem with Parsons's view of social interaction.
 - Social action and the emergent nature of social systems.
 - The continuing relevance of Parsons.
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To begin our journey through the terrain of social theory I shall examine the work of Talcott Parsons. Parsons's work has been extremely influential in sociology in several ways. After the Second World War his ideas were held in high esteem and tended to dominate the intellectual scene until around the mid-1960s, after which they declined in significance. The imprint left by this influence can be seen in three distinct senses. First, Parsons's work set the terms for a model of society which stressed the primary importance of the macro elements as against micro elements. This was expressed as the power of the social system to influence the social behaviour of individuals. Secondly, when the popularity of Parsons's ideas declined, the theories that replaced them were often expressed in the form of a critical dialogue with them, or could be seen as a deliberate attempt

to construct alternatives to them. Thirdly, although the influence of Parsons's work was subdued for a large stretch of time, there has now been a resurgence of interest in his work and some authors have attempted to develop the theoretical ideas that he originally proposed.

There are two things to bear in mind as I discuss Parsons's work. First, my focus of interest will be on the manner in which he construes the relation between individual social behaviour and the larger social environment in which it occurs. In this respect I shall ignore much of what he has to say on such issues as social evolution and the nature of the relation between institutions. Secondly, in confronting Parsons's work one immediately comes up against the problem of the difficulty of the language that he uses. There is no doubt that reading Parsons can be extremely frustrating and productive of headaches. Nonetheless, there is a great deal of value in his work and it deserves closer scrutiny. As a consequence, I shall, where possible, substitute simpler terms and phrases for some of Parsons's more impenetrable prose.

The Development of Parsons's Framework

If we consider Parsons's work from his first major publication in 1937 (*The Structure of Social Action*) to his second in 1951 (*The Social System*), it is clear that his ideas underwent a significant change in emphasis during this time. This is partly due to the fact that the earlier book was largely a critical review of previous authors' work and provided, as it were, a platform on which Parsons was to build his later, very original, theoretical framework. In *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons reviews the work of a number of writers (including Durkheim and Weber but, notably, omitting Marx) and concludes that it is possible to construct a general theory of social action. Such a theory must reject the assumptions of those economic theories which insist that human activity is simply economically motivated – that people act solely on the basis of rational self-interest. These assumptions tended to take the general 'orderliness' of society for granted.

Parsons insisted that orderliness was largely the result of the influence of certain values (such as the belief in family, or the sanctity of human life). It is the fact that people embrace such values that curbs tendencies towards self-interest and reduces (although not entirely) the necessity for external sanctions (such as legal punishments or social ostracism and so on). These values are expressed in rather more concrete and immediate ways by the 'norms' or rules of behaviour

that operate in certain situations. For example, in families 'fathers' and 'mothers' are expected to care for their children and not to abuse or neglect them. Social 'norms' suggest guidelines for behaviour and are based on the values that refer to more general features of social life. In this respect Parsons was drawing on the work of Durkheim, who stressed the role of collectively held beliefs and values as a kind of social 'glue' which created cohesiveness and order in society.

Gouldner (1971) has argued that it is important to understand Parsons's work as an attempt to defend capitalist society against the criticisms contained in Marxist analyses. Although both Marx and Parsons see capitalism as a 'social system', their assessments of it are very different. Marx envisioned capitalist society as basically exploitative (of the working classes), conflict-ridden, and governed primarily by the profit motive inherent in the economic system. On the other hand, while Parsons recognised that capitalism was still striving towards its ideal form, he saw it as a basically fair and meritocratic system in which individuals are rewarded according to the efforts that they are willing to expend. In this sense, Parsons was keen to dislodge Marxist criticism as well as to dispel some of the pessimistic ideas about the future of capitalism that were being put forward by writers who were critics of Marxism (notably Weber and Sombart).

Instead of giving a pessimistic image of a repressive society in which the mass of people are exploited and controlled by the dominant capitalist class, Parsons was keen to emphasise the potential for individuals to benefit from the system and to control their own future. Thus he stressed 'voluntarism' in social life, that is, the capacity for people to act on the basis of their own decisions, desires and choices and not on requirements enforced by the brute workings of an economic system that thrived on inequalities of wealth and power. At the same time, Parsons emphasised the importance of core values as a means of social integration. Such values and norms had an independent role to play in society since they were not simply a reflection of, or determined by, the requirements of the economy.

The Idea of the Social System

Parsons's earlier work also suggested that society exists on different and quite distinct levels of organisation. This is referred to as the principle of emergence and feeds directly into his later work in which he develops an elaborate model of the 'social system'. Parsons employs the principle of emergence in order to describe the four different layers of social organisation that underpin the social system. Each is a level of organisation in its own right, and corresponds to a

<i>System or level</i>	<i>Aspect of experience</i>
1 The physiological system	The body
2 The personality system	Individual psychology
3 The social system	Roles and positions
4 The cultural system	Knowledge, literature, art and other human products

Figure 2.1 *System levels in Parsons's work*

recognisable aspect of our experience of social life. They are represented in Figure 2.1. The model highlights the contribution of four system levels which are related to each other in various ways. This analytic model is simply a tool to help us investigate the empirical features of social life. The difference between it and reality is that in actual social life the levels are not neatly separated out as they are in the model, they are interconnected and overlap with each other in a number of ways. This is very much in line with our actual experiences.

Clearly, we experience or 'feel' the effects of our bodies, our psychological impulses, social conventions and cultural traditions and so on, but we do not experience them as if they were clearly distinguishable from each other. Thus actual reality is always a complicated and 'messy' affair that poses difficulties for our understanding. Nevertheless, the great virtue of a theoretical model such as Parsons's is that it allows us to investigate this complexity by separating out the component units and viewing their workings in a systematic manner. However, we must always be aware that, in this sense, the model is, necessarily, a simplified version of reality. Bearing these points in mind let us now move on to a discussion of the way in which these system levels throw light on the relation between society and the activities of individuals.

The Physiological or Organic System

Although Parsons distinguishes the physiological or 'organic' level of the human body, he does not discuss it in great detail. For Parsons the body is a 'basic foundation' upon which other systems operate. In particular, there is much overlap between the body and the 'personality system' in Parsons's framework, in that the human body is a precondition for the development of the human psyche. In this sense the body is a 'container' for a fund of impulses, drives and motivations that make up the personalities of individuals. However, the personality of

an individual cannot be understood simply in terms of his or her body (although without doubt a person's image of their body may play a pivotal role in their personality). The personality system has to be understood as a 'level of reality' in its own right. It has properties and characteristics which cannot be explained in terms of other levels, and this is an example of the principle of 'emergence' that I referred to before.

The Personality System

This is composed of motivational elements such as a person's beliefs, feelings, emotional attachments, wishes, desires, goals and objectives. These have been incorporated into the individual's attitudes and subjective responses to other people and the social world as a result of their own unique personal biographies. Such biographies trace an individual's experience of growing up in their families and subsequent social contexts like peer groups and work groups that have had a formative effect on their personalities. They also include various 'internalised' beliefs and moral standards that are current or dominant in society.

The individual's motivational 'needs' push him or her to seek gratification generally in terms of the 'solutions' laid down in socially acceptable forms and standards of behaviour. Thus, the individual seeks emotional attachments in the context of the family or romantic love, or seeks great wealth through hard work. In this way the personality system overlaps with the other systems. Nonetheless, it is a unique amalgam that results from this complex of influences. Thus, it too has to be understood as a system in its own right with its own 'emergent properties'.

The Social System

Confusingly, Parsons sometimes uses the term 'social system' (as in the title of his 1951 book) to refer generally to 'society' (society as a social system). At other times, he speaks of the social system as simply one dimension of society which has its own distinct 'emergent properties'. Parsons illustrates this by imagining how the first social systems arose. This 'thought experiment' involves the idea of two (or more) individuals interacting with each other. In order to communicate and co-operate effectively with each other they establish certain understandings and agreements about the nature of their relationship and the sorts of things it will include. In short, they develop a set of common 'expectations' about their mutual behaviour which, over time, tend to shape their orientations to each other.

An example of this can be seen in the development of a friendship relationship. When they first meet, people tend to be rather tentative towards each other but, over time, understandings emerge around mutual interests and passions. Sometimes 'private' languages or meanings are 'created' in order to exclude others and to enhance the depth of shared commitment to each other. In an analogous manner, we can see that social systems emerge from interactions which are repeated over time and which produce durable expectations about the behaviour of those involved. In a fully developed social system such as modern society, these expectations become 'institutionalised'. That is, they become part of the accepted fabric of society which people have to take into account when formulating their behaviour.

Crucially, such expectations revolve around roles and positions in society that have proved to be important to its continuous and efficient functioning. Such networks of positions and roles can be seen in all sectors of society, from the more formal occupational sphere with its authority positions and work roles, through the governmental and economic institutions into the more private and informal worlds of family, love and friendship. In the family and school, and in later socialising agencies, individuals are introduced to the expectations that surround different roles and thus learn how to play them. Many roles, such as that of 'mother', 'father', 'friend' and so on, do not involve any formal training so to speak, rather they are learned without conscious effort. Other more formal roles, like those in the work world or in the realm of politics, have to be more consciously learned and adopted.

The Cultural System

To understand the nature of the cultural system we have to view processes of 'emergence' in a longer-term perspective. Human interaction over long periods of time creates cultural products not only in terms of artifacts, like furniture or buildings of different styles, but also in terms of different forms of knowledge, literature, art and traditions. A specific characteristic of modern societies is that there is a vast wealth of written knowledge (as opposed to the oral cultures of simpler societies).

In this sense, the cultural system is the 'store-house' of the cultural forms and human products that represent the history and traditions of particular societies. The cultural system 'contains' the core values and other normative elements which give each society its cultural distinctiveness. Thus, the 'emergent' features of the cultural system are reflected in the sedimentation of values and tradition;

in short, the cultural heritage of society. As such, the cultural system is unlike the social system in that it is not as closely tied to the interactions between people. Nonetheless, the values and traditions of society indirectly underpin and inform much of this day-to-day behaviour.

The 'Needs' of the Social System

Although the four systems interpenetrate and overlap, the social system is the centrepiece of Parsons's framework. It is here that the stuff of everyday life is routinely enacted; it is here that the substantial weight of society lies. As we shall see, this is reflected in Parsons's more specific vision of the relationship between the individual and society. However, Parsons also suggests that particular systems have 'needs' that must be met in order for them to remain in good and continuous working order. The analogy that Parsons employs here is that of a living organism. Unless certain requirements are forthcoming, such as food and water, and some kind of mechanism exists to convert these things into energy (like a digestive tract), then the organism will die. So, too, will a human society and its various parts. Thus, the social system has its 'needs' or requirements that must be serviced in order to remain properly operational. Parsons suggests there are four principal social system needs which are met by various sectors of society. These are as follows:

<i>Social system need</i>	<i>Fulfilled by</i>
1 Adaptation	The economy – money
2 Goal attainment	The political system – power
3 Integration	Social controls, legal and informal – influence
4 Pattern maintenance	Socialisation – commitment

Figure 2.2 *System needs and their fulfilment*

By using this classification, Parsons is, in effect, 'making sense' of the immediately recognisable major institutions in society in terms of his wider framework. Each institutional sector services important needs which are essential for the survival of the society as a whole. The first, adaptation, is concerned with the economic production of commodities and wealth by manipulation of the environment. The

resource that drives this sector is money. The political sector takes care of goal attainment by co-ordinating activities through the legitimate use of power.

If these two sectors concentrate on 'external' problems, then the other two focus on the internal needs of society. The requirement that a society does not fall into disarray through internal conflict and dissent is handled by the influence of the social community. Thus, formal legal controls as well as informal sanctions (such as ostracism, gossip and so on) help to cement individual members of society to the groups to which they belong. These integrative mechanisms are supplemented by more psychologically based forms of commitment. Processes of socialisation serve to instil the central values and norms of society in its members. These 'pattern-maintaining' elements reinforce the core values in society, by promoting consensus and by ensuring that there is a basic level of conformity.

The Individual and Society: The Macro-Micro Link

Let me now tie all the pieces together to give a general impression of Parsons's solution to the problem which is the principal focus of this book: the connections between macro and micro elements of social life. Parsons himself generally does not speak in terms of 'macro' and 'micro' levels of analysis. His favoured terminology is that of the relation between the individual and society. In effect, Parsons's solution to the individual-society question also provides answers to the macro-micro dilemma (as well as the relation between agency and structure). This is because these oppositions basically refer to the same things in Parsons's work, and therefore the same solution applies to them all.

As we have seen, Parsons views society as a series of interconnected layers or 'system levels'. Thus it is not surprising that his view of the relation between the individual and society involves pinpointing the mechanism which is principally responsible for binding together these different levels. Parsons is very clear that it is the notion of social role which is of primary importance in establishing the connection between individual personalities and social systems. For Parsons, 'role' is the bridge between the individual (both as a biological organism and as definite personality), and the rest of society as represented in the social and cultural systems. By enacting the social roles that constitute the day-to-day substance of society, the unique needs and motivations of people are met by social arrangements. Conversely, the cultural values and norms that give society its

distinctive character find their way into the lives of people via the system of social roles.

According to Parsons this meshing of individuals to their social context occurs partly because people feel the need to fulfil the expectations associated with various roles. These needs arise for two main reasons. First, during the process of socialisation, parents and other significant people inculcate their children with moral values, appropriate patterns of behaviour and so on. As adults, the same individuals tend to adhere to these learned 'role expectations' as blueprints for their ongoing behaviour, thereby reducing uncertainty and giving direction to behaviour. They provide, as it were, a shared set of 'rules of the game' and a stock of background knowledge which people may draw upon to enable them to achieve their goals and intentions in their dealings with others. Secondly, by adhering to the standards and rules of behaviour associated with roles, the person gains the support and trust of others and this in itself reinforces the conforming response. Thus, people become locked into a set of mutual obligations by being committed to the rewards associated with them.

The Pattern Variables

Parsons's wish to retain the idea that people are free to choose their own courses of action, and the idea that the social system (in the form of role expectations) influences and guides their initial choices, creates a certain tension in his framework. This is further emphasised by the addition of what he terms the 'pattern variables', which refer to the range of options open to people in various kinds of situation. The pattern variables are more general than role expectations, and represent the dilemmas that confront people in various situations. Nonetheless, they also represent the wider context in which particular role expectations are shaped. Before I endeavour to explain this in more detail let us examine the pattern variables as they are described by Parsons.

Affectivity versus Affective Neutrality In simple terms, this refers to the extent to which people become emotionally involved in particular kinds of social relationship. In some relationships, such as family and friendships, we feel emotionally close and open to others. In more 'business-like' relationships we adopt a more emotionally neutral attitude. This is the case in professional–client relationships (such as that between doctor and patient).

Specificity versus Diffuseness Some of our relationships are very specific in that they are based on a single thread of interest, such as our momentary