

1 The vexatious fact of society

Social reality is unlike any other because of its human constitution. It is different from natural reality whose defining feature is self-subsistence: for its existence does not depend upon us, a fact which is not compromised by our human ability to intervene in the world of nature and change it. Society is more different still from transcendental reality, where divinity is both self-subsistent and unalterable at our behest; qualities which are not contravened by responsiveness to human intercession. The nascent 'social sciences' had to confront this entity, society, and deal conceptually with its three unique characteristics.

Firstly, that it is inseparable from its human components because the very existence of society depends in some way upon our activities. Secondly, that society is characteristically transformable; it has no immutable form or even preferred state. It is like nothing but itself, and what precisely it is like at any time depends upon human doings and their consequences. Thirdly, however, neither are we immutable as social agents, for what we are and what we do as social beings are also affected by the society in which we live and by our very efforts to transform it.

Necessarily then, the problem of the relationship between individual and society was *the* central sociological problem from the beginning. The vexatious task of understanding the linkage between 'structure and agency' will always retain this centrality because it derives from what society intrinsically is. Nor is this problem confined to those explicitly studying society, for each human being is confronted by it every day of their social life. An inescapable part of our inescapably social condition is to be aware of its constraints, sanctions and restrictions on our ambitions – be they for good or for evil. Equally, we acknowledge certain social blessings such as medication, transportation and education: without their enablements our lives and hopes would both be vastly more circumscribed. At the same time, an inalienable part of our human condition is the feeling of freedom: we are 'sovereign artificers' responsible for our own destinies, and capable of re-making our social environment to benefit human habitation. This book begins by accepting that such ambivalence

2 The vexatious fact of society

in the daily experience of ordinary people is fully authentic. Its authenticity does not derive from viewing subjective experiences as self-veridical. By themselves, the strength of our feelings is never a guarantee of their veracity: our certitudes are poor guides to certainty. Instead, this ambivalence is a real and defining feature of a human being who is also a social being. *We are* simultaneously free and constrained and we *also* have some awareness of it. The former derives from the nature of social reality; the latter from human nature's reflexivity. Together they generate an authentic (if imperfect) reflection upon the human condition in society. It is therefore the credo of this book that the adequacy of social theorizing fundamentally turns on its ability to recognize and reconcile these *two aspects* of lived social reality.

Thus we would betray ourselves, as well as our readers, by offering any form of social *scientism* with 'laws' which are held to be unaffected by the uses and abuses we make of our freedoms, for this renders moral responsibility meaningless, political action worthless and self-reflection pointless. Equally, we delude one another by the pretence that society is simply what we choose to make it and make of it, now or in any generation, for generically 'society' is that which nobody wants in exactly the form they find it and yet it resists both individual and collective efforts at transformation – not necessarily by remaining unchanged but altering to become something else which still conforms to no one's ideal.

From the beginning, however, betrayal and delusion have been common practice when approaching the vexatious fact of society and its human constitution. The earliest attempts to conceptualize this unique entity produced two divergent social ontologies which, in changing guises, have been with us ever since. Both evade the encounter with the vexatious ambivalence of social reality. They can be epitomized as the 'science of society' versus the 'study of wo/man': if the former denies the significance of society's human constitution, the latter nullifies the importance of what is, has been, and will be constituted as society in the process of human interaction. The former is a denial that the real powers of human beings are indispensable to making society what it is. The latter withholds real powers from society by reducing its properties to the projects of its makers. Both thus endorse epiphenomenalism, by holding respectively that agency or structure are inert and dependent variables. In this way they turn the vexatious into something tractable, but only by evading the uniqueness of social reality and treating it as something other than itself – by making it exclusively super-ordinate to people or utterly subordinate to them.

Furthermore, what society is held to be also affects how it is studied. Thus one of the central theses of this book is that any given social ontology

has implications for the explanatory methodology which is (and in consistency can be) endorsed. This connection could not have been clearer in the works of the founding fathers. We need to remain equally clear that this is a necessary linkage – and to uphold it. The tripartite link between ontology, methodology and practical social theory is the *leitmotif* of this whole text.

Thus early protagonists of the ‘Science of Society’ began from an uncompromising ontological position which stated that there was indeed a Social Whole whose *sui generis* properties constituted the object of study. Thus, for Comte, ‘Society is no more decomposable into individuals than a geometrical surface is into lines, or a line into points’.¹ Similarly for Durkheim: ‘Whenever certain elements combine, and thereby produce, by the fact of their combination, new phenomena, it is plain that these new phenomena reside not in the original elements but in the totality formed by their union’.² Here ‘Society’ denoted a totality which is not reducible and this therefore meant that the explanatory programme must be anti-reductionist in nature. Hence, the methodological injunction to explain one ‘social fact’ only by reference to another ‘social fact’. Correct explanations could not be reductionist, that is, cast in terms of individual psychology *because* the nature of social reality is held to be such that the necessary concepts could never be statements about individual people, whether for purposes of description or explanation. Consequently, practical social theories were advanced in exclusively holistic terms (explaining suicide rates by degrees of social integration) and without reference to individual human motivation. This then was a direct and early statement of what I term ‘Downwards Conflation’³ in social theorizing, where the ‘solution’ to the problem of structure and agency consists in rendering the latter epiphenomenal. Individuals are held to be ‘indeterminate material’ which is unilaterally moulded by society, whose holistic properties have complete monopoly over causation, and which therefore operate in a unilateral and downward manner. The contrary standpoint is represented by Individualism.

Those who conceived of their task as the ‘study of wo/man’ insisted that social reality consisted of nothing but individuals and their activities. Thus for J. S. Mill, ‘Men in a state of society are still men. Their actions and passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature. Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance with different properties, as hydrogen and oxygen are different from

¹ A. Comte, *Système de politique positive*, L. Mathias, Paris, 1951, vol. II, p. 181.

² E. Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Free Press, New York, 1962, p. xlvii.

³ See Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, ch. 2.

4 The vexatious fact of society

water'.⁴ Similarly for Weber, references to collectivities like the family, state or army are 'only a certain kind of development of actual or possible actions of individual persons'.⁵ Having defined social reality individualistically, it followed for both thinkers that explanations of it must be in terms of individuals. Hence for Mill, 'The effects produced in social phenomena by any complex set of circumstances amount precisely to the sum of the effects of the circumstances taken singly'.⁶ If society is an aggregate, then however complex, it can be understood only by a process of disaggregation, and explanation therefore consists in reduction. For Weber too, though collectivities like business corporations may look like non-people, since they are made up of nothing else then they 'must be treated solely as the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons'.⁷ Since an aggregate is the resultant of its components, this means that in practical social theorizing we are presented with 'Upwards Conflation'. The solution to the problem of structure and agency is again epiphenomenal, but this time it is the social structure which is passive, a mere aggregate consequence of individual activities, which is incapable of acting back to influence individual people. Thus, people are held to monopolize causal power which therefore operates in a one-way, upwards direction.

Already in *stating* the manner in which early social analysts confronted society, it has not been possible to do so without touching upon three different aspects which are intrinsic to *any* solution offered. Since the purpose of this book is to proffer a particular kind of solution and one which is intended to be of use to those engaged in substantive social analysis, it is crucial to be clear about the three necessary components – ontology, methodology, and practical social theory – and their interconnections. I have already stated one basic thesis, namely that the social ontology adopted has implications for the explanatory methodology endorsed and indicated how this was the case at the start of the discipline. However, it is equally the case that the methodology employed has ramifications for the nature of practical social theorizing – and in the two early paradigms this led paradigmatically to opposite versions of conflationary theory.

I believe we should never be satisfied with these forms of conflationary theorizing, which either deny people all freedom because of their involvement in society or leave their freedom completely untrammelled by their social involvements. The fact that neither Durkheim nor Weber managed

⁴ J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic Ratiocintive and Inductive*, People's Editions, London, 1884, p. 573.

⁵ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Free Press, New York, 1964 (orig. 1922) p. 102.

⁶ Mill, *System*, p. 583.

⁷ Weber, *Theory*, p. 101.

to hold consistently to his own explanatory injunctions when conducting practical social analyses might have induced some reflection upon the adequacies of their methodological charters and ontological commitments. However, the nineteenth-century parting of the ways between the 'science of society' and the 'study of wo/man' passed, virtually unaltered, into the twentieth-century debate between Holism and Individualism in the philosophy of 'social science'. And there it continued to reproduce the deficiencies of both downwards and upwards conflation in practical social theorizing by re-endorsing much the same explanatory methodologies and social ontologies as had traditionally been advanced.

Both are deficient and have been regularly criticized, but the current state of the art still harbours them, together with numerous variants and claimants to the status of 'alternatives'. Because of this, commentators regularly used to signal 'crisis', whereas postmodernists now celebrate 'fragmentation' in social theory. My principal contention is that we cannot extricate ourselves from this theoretical morass without recognizing the tripartite connections between ontology, methodology and practical social theory and ensuring consistency between them. There have, however, been two different responses to the present situation whose consequences are instructive. On the one hand, some have been tempted to uncouple practical social theory from its underpinnings, to survey the array of perspectives, and suggest an eclectic pragmatism in order to have the best of all worlds. Such 'perspectivism' simultaneously denies that there are serious underlying reasons for theoretical variety and slides via instrumentalism into a marriage of inconsistent premisses. On the other hand, some social theorists have returned to work exclusively on the re-conceptualization of social reality. As such they may be playing a useful role in the division of sociological labour, but if they suggest that their ontological exertions suffice, the theoretical enterprise simply cannot be resumed on this unfinished basis. The practical analyst of society needs to know not only *what social reality is*, but also *how to begin to explain it*, before addressing the particular problem under investigation. In short, methodology, broadly conceived of as an explanatory programme, is the necessary link between social ontology and practical theory.

This is what this book is intended to supply, an explanatory methodology which is indeed pivotal, called the morphogenetic approach. (The 'morpho' element is an acknowledgement that society has no pre-set form or preferred state: the 'genetic' part is a recognition that it takes its shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities.) In order to play its part in the chain 'ontology – methodology – practical social theory', such an explanatory framework has to be firmly anchored at both ends.

6 The vexatious fact of society

Firstly, this means that it has to be consistently embedded in an adequate social ontology. Yet I have already begun to intimate that the study of society got off on the wrong footing in both the Individualist and Holist conceptions of reality, and in so far as these do still remain as very serious contenders, it will be necessary to break with both. Secondly, the morphogenetic approach is meant to be of practical utility for analysts of society. In itself, of course, an explanatory framework neither explains, nor purports to explain, anything. Nevertheless, it performs a regulatory role, for though many substantive theories may be compatible with it, this is not the case for all, and an explanatory methodology therefore encourages theorizing in one direction whilst discouraging it in others. The primary regulative function which the morphogenetic framework seeks to assume is one which refuses to countenance *any form of conflationary theorizing* at the practical level.

Although frequent references will be made to its substantive applications (usually drawn from my own work on education and culture), what other practitioners would make of it is left to their discretion in relation to their own substantive problems. Instead, the major concern of this book is with the link between this explanatory methodology and social ontology, precisely because existing combinations are found wanting in themselves and also guilty of fostering conflation between structure and agency, which is then registered at the level of practical theorizing.

Traditions of conflation

Generically, conflation in social theory represents one-dimensional theorizing. As in the old 'individual versus society' debate or its later expression as the 'structure and agency' problem, traditional conflationists were those who saw this as a matter of taking sides and who could come down with great conviction on one or the other. Their common denominator was this readiness to choose and consequently to repudiate sociological dualism where the different 'sides' refer to different elements of social reality, which possess different properties and powers. In contradistinction, the *interplay and interconnection* of these properties and powers form the central concern of non-conflationary theorizing, whose hallmark is the recognition that the two have to be related rather than conflated. Instead, classical conflationists always advance some device which reduces one to the other, thus depriving the two of independent properties, capable of exerting autonomous influences, which would automatically defy one-dimensional theorizing. The most generic traditional device was epiphenomenalism through upwards or downwards reduction, although the precise mechanism employed showed some

variation – aggregation/disaggregation, composition/decomposition, or the homologies of miniaturization/magnification.

Traditionally, too, the major divide which theorists have sought to overcome in these ways has been labelled differently in various schools of thought and countries. Although there are differences in nuances, I regard the fundamental issues raised by those debates variously named ‘individual and society’, ‘voluntarism and determinism’, ‘structure and agency’ or ‘the micro- versus macro-’ as being fundamentally identical. Instead of attempting to see these as standing in some ascending order of complexity (*contra* Layder⁸), I regard their differential accentuation as little more than historical and comparative variations on the same theme. In particular, discussion in the UK has consistently concentrated upon the ‘problem of structure and agency’, whilst in the USA the pre-occupation has been with ‘the problem of scope’,⁹ which has now resurfaced, re-named as the ‘micro-macro link’.¹⁰ However, nomenclature should not mislead us for, as Jeffrey Alexander emphasizes, these are versions of exactly the same debate: ‘The perennial conflict between individualistic and collectivist theories has been re-worked as a conflict between micro-sociology and macro-sociology.’¹¹

Here the parallel form of conflationary theorizing takes the form of the displacement of scope which ‘is committed whenever a theorist assumes, without further ado, that theoretical schemes or models worked out on the basis of macro-sociological considerations fit micro-sociological interpretations, or vice versa’.¹² In the downwards conflationary version, a homology was asserted between the societal system and the small group which was held to constitute a miniaturized version of the former because orchestrated by the same central value system. Hence the one-dimensionality of Parsons’ processes for analysing ‘any system of action’ whatever its scope. Since to him ‘there are continuities all the way from two-person interaction to the USA as a social system’, it follows that ‘we can translate back and forth between large scale social systems and small groups’.¹³ This licence to start wherever one wants and to move ‘back and forth’ with ease depends upon the validity of the homological premiss,

⁸ Derek Layder, *Understanding Social Theory*, Sage, London, 1994, p. 3.

⁹ Helmut Wagner, ‘Displacement of scope: a problem of the relationship between small-scale and large-scale sociological theories’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 1964, 69:6.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, Richard Munch and Neil Smelser (eds.), *The Micro-Macro Link*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987. ‘In the last debate the discipline of sociology resuscitated an old dilemma in a new form – a form, unfortunately, that has done little to resolve the dilemma itself.’ Alexander, ‘Action and its environments’, p. 289. ¹¹ Alexander, ‘Action and its environments’.

¹² Wagner, ‘Displacement of scope’, p. 583.

¹³ T. Parsons, ‘The social system: a general theory of action’, in R. R. Grinker (ed.), *Toward a Unified Theory of Human Behavior*, Basic Books, New York, 1956, pp. 190.

8 The vexatious fact of society

namely that the same properties (no more, no less, and no different) are indeed found throughout society.

The upward conflationary version simply made the opposite homological assumption, i.e. that society is simply the small group writ large. This led interpretative sociologists in particular to place a 'big etc.' against their microscopic expositions and to hold out the expectation that explanation of the social system could be arrived at by a process of accretion. This aggregative ethnographic programme depended upon the validity of exactly the same homological premiss about there being no more, no less and no different properties characterizing different levels of society.¹⁴ This central premiss will be challenged in every chapter of the present work.

The final and most important similarity between these parallel debates in the UK and the USA was their firm rooting in empiricism. The conviction that social theory must confine itself to observables, since the perceptual criterion was held to be the only guarantor of reality, provided British individualists with their trump card (for who could doubt the existence of flesh-and-blood people) and the collectivists with their stumbling block (since how could they validate the existence of any property unless they could translate it into a series of observational statements about people). The American debate was even more unabashed in its positivism, since its defining terms, the 'micro-' and the 'macro-' necessarily dealt only with an observable property, that is *size*.

Since I have maintained that it was one and the same debate going on either side of the Atlantic, then I seriously want to question whether 'the main story'¹⁵ in American social theory or anywhere else should be about *size per se*. In fact, to disassociate the United States' version of the debate from this empirical observable feature is paralleled by the more comprehensive task of disassociating the British debate from empiricism altogether. In other words, it is my view that only by rejecting the terms of these traditional debates and completely revising them on a different ontological basis can we get away from one dimensional conflationary theorizing and replace it by theories of the interdependence and interplay between different kinds of social properties.

Thus in the American debate there is a substantial consensus, that I seek to challenge, which unequivocally considers the problem of how to relate the micro and the macro as being about how to forge a linkage between social units of different *sizes*. Thus Munch and Smelser,¹⁶

¹⁴ For a more extended discussion of these points, see, Margaret S. Archer, 'The problems of scope in the sociology of education', *International Review of Sociology*, 1987, ns 1: 83–99. ¹⁵ Layder, *Social Theory*, p. 2f.

¹⁶ Richard Munch and Neil Smelser, 'Relating the micro and macro', in Alexander et al. (eds.), *The Micro-Macro Link*, pp. 356–7.

reviewing the field in 1987, produced seven different definitions of the terms ‘micro’ and ‘macro’, which (with the exception of Peter Blau) all firmly associated the former with the small scale and the latter with the large scale. In other words, despite their differences, Layder’s recent formulation would generally be accepted as uncontroversial by them. ‘Micro analysis or “microsociology” concentrates on the more personal and immediate aspects of social interaction in daily life. Another way of saying this is that it focuses on actual face-to-face encounters between people. Macro analysis or “macrosociology” focuses on the larger-scale more general features of society such as organizations, institutions and culture.’¹⁷ Instead, this seems to me highly controversial, and to represent a tradition with which social theory should break. It needs to be replaced by an emphasis upon the incidence of emergent properties which delineate different strata – an emphasis which does not assume that observable differences in the size of groups automatically means that they constitute distinct levels of social reality.

Although no one would deny that empirically there are big and small units in society, this does not necessarily mean that they possess properties whose linkage presents any particular problems. That is, the real ‘aspects’ or ‘features’ of social reality are not by definition tied to the *size* of interacting elements (the *site* of the encounter, or for that matter, the *sentiment* accompanying interaction). Thus, I am in complete agreement with Alexander’s statement ‘that this equation of micro with individual is extremely misleading, as indeed, is the attempt to find any specific size correlation with the micro/macro difference. There can be no empirical referents for micro or macro as such. They are analytical contrasts, suggesting emergent levels within empirical units, not antagonistic empirical units themselves.’¹⁸ In the same way, I want to maintain that ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ are *relational* terms meaning that a given stratum can be ‘micro’ to another and ‘macro’ to a third etc. What justifies the differentiation of strata and thus use of the terms ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ to characterize their relationship is the existence of *emergent properties* pertaining to the latter but not to the former, even if they were elaborated from it. But this has nothing to do with size, site or sentiment.

Emergent properties are *relational*, arising out of combination (e.g. the division of labour from which high productivity emerges), where the latter is capable of reacting back on the former (e.g. producing monotonous work), has its own causal powers (e.g. the differential wealth of nations), which are causally irreducible to the powers of its components (individual workers). This signals the *stratified nature of social reality* where different strata possess different emergent properties and powers.

¹⁷ Layder, *Social Theory*, p. 1.¹⁸ Alexander, ‘Action and its environments’, p. 290.

However, the key points in this connection are that emergent strata constitute (a) the crucial entities in need of linking by explaining how their causal powers originate and operate, but (b) that such strata do not neatly map onto empirical units of any particular magnitude. Indeed, whether they coincide with the 'big' or the 'small' is contingent and thus there cannot be a 'micro'-'macro' problem which is defined exclusively by the relative size of social units.

Thus in the course of this book, frequent references will be made to 'the societal'. Each time, this has a concrete referent – particular emergent properties belonging to a specific society at a given time. Both the referent and the properties are real, they have full ontological status, but what do they have to do with 'the big'? The society in question may be small, tribal and work on a face-to-face basis. Nor do they have anything to do with what is, relatively, 'the biggest' at some point in time. We may well wish to refer to certain societal properties of Britain (the 'macro' unit for a particular investigation) which is an acknowledged part of bigger entities, like Europe, developed societies, or the English speaking world. We would do so if we wanted to explain, for example, the role of the 'Falklands factor' in recent elections and in so doing we would also incidentally be acknowledging that people who go in for it take their nationalism far from 'impersonally', and that the 'site' of neo-colonialism may be far distant.

Similarly the existence of small-scale interpersonal encounters does not make these into a sociological category, much less if this is on the presumption that they are somehow immune to 'factors' belonging to other strata of social reality, possessed of some much greater freedom for internal self-determination and presumed to be inconsequential for the system of which they are part. To the social realist there is no 'isolated' micro world – no *lebenswelt* 'insulated' from the socio-cultural system in the sense of being unconditioned by it, nor a hermetically sealed domain whose day-to-day doings are guaranteed to be of no systemic 'import'.

On the contrary, the entrance and exit doors of the life world are permanently open and the understanding of its conditions, course and consequences are predicated upon acknowledging this. For example, small-scale interactions between teachers and pupils do not just happen in classrooms but within educational systems, and those between landlords and tenants are not in-house affairs but take place on the housing market. Both pupils and teachers, for instance, bring in with them different degrees of bargaining power (cultural capital as expertise) that is resources with which they were endowed in wider society by virtue of family, class, gender and ethnicity. Equally, the definition of instruction which they literally encounter in schools is not one which can freely be