

Social theory of modern societies: Anthony Giddens and his critics

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1

Social theory as critique

RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN

Structuration theory is intrinsically incomplete if not linked to a conception of social science as critical theory.
The Constitution of Society, p. 287

The extensive *oeuvre* of Anthony Giddens is already a remarkable achievement. There are few contemporary social theorists and sociologists whose thinking exhibits comparable scope, diversity and subtlety. Giddens is in the process of attempting nothing less than a rethinking of the modern sociological tradition. He has written incisively and provocatively about Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Parsons and Habermas. He has grappled with every major sociological movement, including the varieties of structuralism, functionalism, systems theory, ethnomethodology, phenomenological sociology and symbolic interactionism. He has a keen sense of the relevance of contemporary philosophic currents for social thought ranging over Anglo-American, German and French philosophy. He has expanded the domain of sociological thinking by showing the importance of themes as diverse as Heidegger's reflections on temporality and the significance of time-space studies in human geography. He is always seeking to explore the dialectical interplay between theory and empirical research, and has confronted thorny questions – neglected by many other social theorists – such as the distinctive character and role of nationalism and the nation-state in contemporary societies. And he has done all this with rare hermeneutical skill. Giddens combines a flair for judicious sympathetic exposition with an uncanny ability to locate and specify problems, strengths and weaknesses in the positions and thinkers he examines. The most important and impressive feature of his work is not his intellectual virtuosity, but the systematic impulse that is evident even in his earliest writings, and which has become more focused and dominant in his recent books. Giddens is engaged in the ambitious project of developing a comprehensive textured social theory adequate for our time which at once incorporates the insights of the major social thinkers, which rejects what is inadequate and mistaken, and which can guide and illuminate empirical sociological research. It is this systematic project that I want to explore – a project that centres on what Giddens calls 'The Theory of Structuration', a theoretical approach that reconstructs the duality of structure and human agency. I want to probe the relevance of the theory of structuration for understanding the *critical* functions of social theory.

Given the diversity and richness of Giddens's writings and his own constant emphasis on the importance of time-space context, the initial problem is to gain a proper orientation. Let me begin to situate his project by comparing and contrasting his recent book, *The Constitution of Society* (1984) with Robert Merton's classic, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949).

Merton's work served as a manifesto and statement of the sociological consensus for a generation of sociologists. One way to discern the change (progress?) in social theory during the past thirty-five years is to examine the differences between these two texts. There is not a major thesis advanced by Merton that Giddens does not directly challenge and/or seriously qualify. We can begin to understand what Giddens is 'up to' by examining what he combats – and why he so strongly opposes it. Merton began his famous chapter 'Manifest and Latent Functions' with a bold claim:

Functional analysis is at once the most promising and possibly the least codified of contemporary approaches to problems of sociological interpretation . . . The accomplishments of functional analysis are sufficient to suggest that its large promise will ultimately be fulfilled, just as its current deficiencies testify to the need for periodically overhauling the past the better to build for the future.¹

Giddens, although he concedes that functional analysis has 'strongly emphasized the significance of unintended consequences of action', tells us in an unqualified manner that 'conceptually its influence has been largely pernicious' (p. xxxi).² Giddens's sustained and multifaced attacks on functionalism (in all its varieties) are only the tip of the iceberg of his disagreements with Merton (and with those sociologists who share Merton's sociological orientation).³ Merton begins his book by reflecting on the nature of sociology as a discipline, the logical character of sociological theory and explanation, and the relation of theory to empirical research. Giddens challenges every major claim made by Merton.

Merton compares the development of sociology with other natural sciences such as physics, chemistry and biology. He tells us that it is more 'realistic' and 'psychologically more rewarding' to compare the accomplishments and potential of twentieth-century sociology with seventeenth-century medicine rather than with twentieth-century physics. 'Perhaps sociology is not yet ready for its Einstein because it has not yet found its Newton' (p. 7). Merton never seriously questions the appropriateness of the analogy between sociology as a scientific discipline and the other natural sciences. He even suggests that sociology may achieve results comparable to twentieth-century physics when it has benefited from the 'billions of man-hours of sustained, disciplined, and

¹ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1949), p. 21. All page references to Merton refer to this book.

² Unless otherwise noted, all page references to Giddens refer to *CS*.

³ Giddens criticizes functionalism in several of his recent books. In addition to his remarks on functional analysis in *CS*, see 'Functionalism: après la lutte', in *SSPT*.

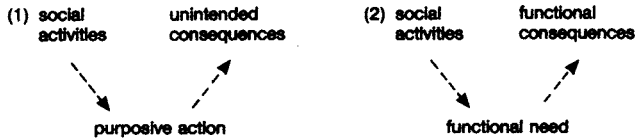
cumulative research' (p. 7) which were required for the achievements of contemporary physics. But for Giddens the very analogy between sociology and the natural sciences is misconceived. He hits hard at the popular thesis that sociology is a young or 'immature' natural science. Sociology is not and never can be the *type* of natural science of human beings which Merton presupposes to be its goal and rationale. (This does *not* mean that sociology cannot be scientific.) Merton sharply distinguishes the 'history of theory and the systematics of theory'. Superficially Giddens himself might accept such a distinction, but he strongly opposes the way in which Merton makes his distinction. For Merton the history of social theory consists of 'who said what by way of speculation or hypothesis' and includes 'the false starts, the archaic doctrines and the fruitless errors of the past'. 'The systematics of theory' presumably consists of 'the highly selective accumulation of those small parts of earlier theory which has thus far survived the tests of empirical research' (p. 5). For Giddens, this facile distinction between the history and systematics of theory is misleading. It is indicative of how much Merton (and other naturalistically inclined social scientists) have uncritically accepted a now discredited logical empiricist conception of natural science. This is further illustrated by what is perhaps best known in Merton's manifesto, his defence of 'theories of the middle range'. Merton was advocating a *via media* between theories which are 'all-embracing and grandiose' and 'minor working hypotheses', but his notion of theory is essentially a deductive-nomological conception of theory. He distinguishes two types of sociological generalization: empirical generalization, 'an isolated proposition summarizing observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables'; and 'scientific laws'. 'The second type of sociological generalization, the so-called "scientific law", differs from the foregoing inasmuch as it is a statement of invariance *derivable* from a theory' (p. 92). Giddens brings a whole battery of arguments against this very understanding of theory. This is the concept of theory which was privileged by logical empiricists. But the post-empiricist philosophy of science has shown that it 'has turned out to be of quite limited application even within the natural sciences' (p. xviii). If this is the way in which theory is conceived, then 'anyone who would seek to apply it to social science must recognize that (as yet) there is no theory at all' (p. xviii). Giddens hits harder. The very seductiveness of the deductive-nomological conception of theory and scientific law is based on a misguided assumption: 'the idea that the "theory" in social theory must consist essentially of generalizations if it is to have explanatory content' (p. xviii). But this is a fiction. 'Most "why?" questions do not need a generalization to answer them, nor do the answers logically imply that there must be some generalization lurking around which could be invoked to back up the answer' (p. xix). Giddens goes even further in his attempt to demolish and deconstruct the very understanding of theory, explanation and generalization that Merton advocates, and which has been (and continues to be) accepted in weaker versions by many social scientists. Merton not only mysti-

fies the conception of social theory, but obscures the character and role of empirical generalizations in sociology. Giddens tells us that ‘uncovering of generalizations is not the be-all and end-all of social theory’ (p. xix). Furthermore, empirical generalizations do not consist solely of propositions ‘summarizing observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables’. There are also generalizations (which have major importance in Giddens’s theory of structuration) which ‘hold because actors themselves know them – in some guise – and apply them in the enactment of what they do. The social scientific observer does not in fact have to “discover” these generalizations, although that observer may give a new discursive form to them’ (p. xix).

Furthermore, the claims that Merton makes about theory, law, explanation and empirical generalization obfuscate what he wants to clarify – the relation between sociological theory and empirical research. His conceptual apparatus leads us to think that the primary role of empirical research is to ‘discover’ those empirical generalizations that confirm or disconfirm sociological laws derivable from theories. But this conception of the role of empirical research is far too limiting. It slights the empirical contributions of the type of ethnographic research which is not at all concerned with summarizing observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables, but with providing ‘thick descriptions’ of the forms of life of social agents.

One could continue in this vein showing in detail how doggedly Giddens deconstructs the edifice of sociological theory as presented by Merton (and which was widely shared by sociologists). Functionalism is not the only sociological orientation attacked by Giddens. He is equally relentless in his criticism of structuralism, objectivism, subjectivism, naturalism and evolutionism. Giddens uses a variety of guerrilla tactics in attacking all these ‘isms’. Even his prose becomes more barbed and terse when he ‘goes after’ the spectres that still haunt social theory. There are few who can rival Giddens as a penetrating critic of the dogmas, misleading metaphors (e.g., the variety of biological and systemic metaphors) and unquestioned presuppositions that pervade sociological thinking. But Giddens is not merely a ‘critical critic’, or a ‘negative critic’. What informs his detailed analyses and gives them so much punch is the way in which he uses them to elaborate an alternative substantive sociological approach to understanding, explaining and criticizing contemporary society.

Let me illustrate this by returning to the question of functionalism. I have already indicated that Giddens does think that functional analysis has made a positive contribution in emphasizing the importance of ‘unintended consequences’ of social action. His point is that we can appropriate this positive emphasis without any appeal to functional concepts. What precisely is wrong with functionalism? Although Giddens raises many different types of objections to functionalism, his central objection is that a functional explanation ‘does *not* really explain anything. We can bring this out by contrasting the types of account’ (p. 294).



Interpretation (2) is the type of account favoured by functionalists. But 'interpretation (2) is not an explanation because it does not supply a mechanism linking the positing of a functional need and the consequences that are presumed to ensue for the wider social system in which the activities to be explained are involved' (p. 295).

Consider Merton's 'functional interpretation' of the Hopi rain ceremonial. The manifest function of the ceremony is to bring about rain, but the latent function is to reinforce 'a unitary value system' required to sustain such a small society. This *may be* the unintended consequence of the social practice of the rain ceremony, but we can state this without any appeal to functional concepts. (This is the point of interpretation (1).) We only mystify this situation by suggesting that these consequences occur 'because' of a 'functional need'. So pseudo-functional explanations not only fail to supply a mechanism linking a 'functional need' to unintended consequences, but the very concept of a 'functional need' is a fiction (a fiction which in part gains plausibility because of the misleading appropriation of biological metaphors about the 'needs' of social systems).

Giddens digs deeper. The crucial concept of 'unintended consequences' itself presupposes a viable concept of human agency. This is what Giddens seeks to elaborate. We cannot legitimately speak of unintended consequences unless we clarify the criteria for distinguishing intentional from unintentional action. Giddens knows that systematically clarifying the nature of human agency demands explicating a series of interrelated concepts such as power, motives and reasons. (Here we can follow Giddens's creative appropriation and *reconstruction* of the Anglo-American philosophic analysis of agency and action.) Furthermore human social agency cannot be adequately grasped unless we conceptually understand how agency itself is reflexively and recursively implicated in social structures. In short, thinking through what is right and wrong about functionalism, probing and critically assessing what functional interpretations presuppose, brings us to the very heart of the theory of structuration – the theory intended to illuminate the duality and dialectical interplay of agency and structure.⁴

⁴ My focus on Giddens's critique of functionalism, and how it both supports and is informed by structuration theory, is intended to illustrate what is characteristic of his critical approach. Giddens is not merely concerned with 'scoring' negative points against the doctrines he opposes, but with showing us how *thinking through* the insights and inadequacies of those doctrines contributes to the articulation and support of structuration theory. I suggest this is the most illuminating way of interpreting his critiques of evolutionism, objectivism, subjectivism and naturalism. In this respect, Giddens's approach reflects a point which has been forcefully made in the post-empiricist philosophy of science, i.e., we can judge the adequacy of a theory – such as structuration theory – by its ability to explain what is valid and invalid in rival theories.

What then is the theory of structuration? In a preliminary statement, Giddens tells us:

Structure, as recursively organized sets of *rules* and *resources*, is out of time and space, save in its instantiations and coordination as memory traces, and is marked by an 'absence of the subject'. The *social systems* in which structure is recursively implicated, on the contrary, comprise the situated activities of *human agents*, reproduced across *time and space*. Analysing the *structuration* of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the *knowledgeable* activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action *contexts*, are produced and reproduced in interaction. Crucial to the idea of *structuration* is the theorem of the *duality of structure* . . . The constitution of *agents* and *structures* are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. According to the notion of the duality of structure, the *structural properties* of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize. Structure is not 'external' to individuals . . . Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling. (p. 25 (my italics))

On first reading, the above summary statement is extremely dense. *The Constitution of Society*, as well as much of Giddens's recent writings, can be seen as an explication, elaboration and explanation of what this means and entails. (For brief explanations of the italicized expressions in the above passage see his Glossary, pp. 373–7, in *The Constitution of Society*.) The concrete details of Giddens's theory of structuration are so rich and complex that in this context, one can hope only to convey its leading themes, to articulate the central vision that informs the theory. For while the theory provokes numerous questions and is still very much in the process of being developed, one can already discern its contours. The theory is powerful and attractive because it expresses a deep understanding of what we are as reflexive knowledgeable human agents who are always conditioned by and are constantly reproducing social structures.

We can bring forth this central vision from a variety of perspectives. One way of gaining a purchase on the theory is to view it against two extreme poles that have characterized a great deal of twentieth-century sociology. There are social thinkers who have primarily focused their attention on structures, social constraints and systemic features of society, and who have claimed that this is the proper domain of sociological analysis. These impersonal structures must be discovered and explained if we are to understand how human beings function in society. Frequently, from this point of view, the task of the sociologist is taken to be the discovery of those forces, laws, tendencies and 'structural constraints' which are always working 'behind the backs' of social agents. There are even those who argue that the social actor *dissolves* into a series of structures or is to be located as a mere 'place holder' within a dynamic impersonal system. When such a structuralist orientation is pressed to its extreme, it elicits a backlash. There arises a deep suspicion about any talk of

impersonal structures. From this opposite extreme, all such talk is understood to be a reification or hypostatization of what is always fluid and changing – what is always in the process of being negotiated and renegotiated. Whether advocates of this extreme think of themselves as ‘methodological individualists’ or ethnomethodologists focusing on the face-to-face interactions of individuals, they have little sympathy with anything resembling reified structures. When these opposing poles are pressed to their extremes we are confronted with a stark either/or. *Either* we are left with a dance of impersonal structures, *or* with an interplay of nominalistic actors.

Of course, the situation is not nearly as simple and as blatant as this. Advocates who are attracted to one of these poles – the poles of structure and agency – claim to be able to accommodate the ‘insights’ of their opponents. Giddens shows that most of these ‘compromises’ do not work. They do not work because we cannot simply amend a deficient approach by adding a few concessionary corollaries. If we are to escape this unstable opposition then a reconstruction of the concepts of structure *and* agency is required. We must analyse social structure so that we can clearly discern how it *requires* agency, and analyse human agency in such a manner that we grasp how all social action *involves* social structure. For social structure is always both *constraining* and *enabling*. It at once limits and determines ‘the capability of the individual to “make a difference” to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events’ (p. 14). This is the primary force of Giddens’s claim that ‘the constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, but represent a duality’ (p. 25). Each is dependent upon and implicates the other.

Another perspective for grasping what is central to the theory of structuration is to view it (as Giddens does) as a commentary and elaboration of Marx’s famous claim that ‘Men [let us immediately say human beings] make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.’ After citing this passage, Giddens remarks: ‘Well, so they do. But what a diversity of complex problems of social analysis this apparently innocuous pronouncement turns out to disclose!’ (p. xxi). It is precisely these ‘complex problems’ that the theory of structuration is meant to illuminate and to solve.

I think the clearest way to gain an understanding of the central thrust of the theory of structuration is to focus on the concept of ‘practical consciousness’. Giddens tells us that ‘the significance of practical consciousness is a leading theme of [*The Constitution of Society*]’ (p. xxiii), and it is a leading theme of the theory of structuration. Giddens summarizes (in his Glossary) what he means by ‘practical consciousness’.

What actors know (believe) about social conditions, including especially conditions of their action, but cannot express discursively; no bar of repression, however, protects practical consciousness, as in the case with the unconscious.
(p. 375)

Practical consciousness must be distinguished from discursive conscious-

ness on the one hand and the unconscious on the other hand. When Giddens speaks about the knowledgeableability of activities by social actors, he is referring primarily to their practical knowledgeableability (know-how). Human agents practically know a great deal about what they are doing, about their society, about the rules of the games in which they find themselves (and even how to get around these rules). Social agents are always reflexively monitoring their action. We are not 'cultural dopes', nor are we agents who are self-transparently aware of what we are doing. We are always in the process of making history in circumstances which are not of our choosing, and we are not (and cannot be) fully aware of what we are doing and making.

William James once commented that 'any author is easy if you catch the centre of his vision', and he went on to suggest that in order to appreciate the technical details of an author's system, one needed to catch the centre of his vision. Perhaps James was a bit sanguine, but his remarks are relevant for understanding Giddens. If one is to grasp the technical details of Giddens's reflections on time-space studies for social analysis, the significance of the duality of presence/absence, regionalization, ontological security, etc., then we must see how such discussions are informed by, contribute to and texture his central vision of the duality of structure and agent.

I have stated that the vision which is at the centre of the theory of structuration is powerful and attractive without fully warranting this claim. I do think Giddens is on target when he focuses on the 'flip-flopping' character of so much contemporary sociological analysis. Indeed I think we find this same unstable swinging back and forth not only in the entire range of the social disciplines but in all cultural disciplines – including political theory and philosophy. In all these disciplines there has been an unstable oscillation between a nominalistic obsession with isolated individual agents and a fascination with dissolving agents into sign systems, structures and *epistemes*. Think, for example, of the typical ways in which 'the philosophy of action' is approached by Anglo-American analytic philosophers who model their analyses on isolated intentional agents, and contrast this with the French fascination with *différence*, the play of structures and the 'decentering of the subject'. Both tendencies can be found in Nietzsche – which may be one of the reasons why he is so much in vogue. But after all the fashionable talk of deconstruction, the deepest intellectual need of our time is for reconstruction. This is what Giddens is tenaciously attempting to accomplish. His project of reconstruction is not only theoretically important, but has enormous practical significance. For without falling into the despair of thinking that there is a 'logic of history' which is always working behind our backs with inexorable necessity or falling into a simplistic voluntaristic illusion that we can be complete masters of our fate, Giddens enables us to understand both the limits of and opportunities for shaping our destinies. For these reasons, what he has already accomplished has significance that goes far beyond the domain of sociology.

There is, of course, plenty that is open for serious criticism in Giddens. His intellectual vices are the other side of his virtues. In his desire to be comprehensive, he frequently writes as if he has a well-thought-out opinion on virtually every topic or theme which has been addressed by any social thinker. Consequently, there is unevenness in his analyses. (For example, his detailed examination of the nature and varieties of types of social constraint is subtle, discriminating and illuminating, while his claims about the unconscious and its role in social explanation tend to be superficial.) One sometimes feels that Giddens is not always in control of the material he is discussing. Where one expects detailed explication and justification, too often there is repetition and 'eloquent' variation. Temperamentally, Giddens is foxlike in his approach to issues, although his systematic ambitions require him to be like the hedgehog. Given the sheer variety of topics, themes and thinkers he treats, one can understand why he tells us 'This was not a particularly easy book to write and proved in some part refractory to the normal ordering of chapters' (p. xxxv). Giddens is guilty of a 'sin' common among other sociologists who think in a grand manner. For whenever he confronts a difficult problem, he is tempted to introduce a plethora of distinctions and schemas. (Giddens is critical of Parsons and Habermas for engaging in this practice, but he is guilty of it himself.) Many of these distinctions are illuminating, but one frequently has the uneasy feeling that much more needs to be said about the *criteria* of their applicability. Giddens is self-reflective about the interplay of theory and empirical research. While he rejects the narrow idea that the sole or main function of empirical research is to confirm or disconfirm 'laws' derivable from theoretical postulates, and the naive inductionist view that we can build theories by generalizing empirical observations, he does argue that theory can 'sensitize' us to empirical research.

The concepts of structuration theory, as with any competing theoretical perspective, should for many research purposes be regarded as sensitizing devices, nothing more. That is to say, they may be useful for thinking about research problems and the interpretation of research results. But to suppose that being theoretically informed – which it is the business of everyone working in the social sciences to be in some degree – means always operating with a welter of abstract concepts is as mischievous a doctrine as one which suggests that we can get along very well without using such concepts at all. (pp. 326–7)

The final chapter of *The Constitution of Society*, 'Structuration, Empirical Research and Social Critique', is a *tour de force* in which Giddens shows how structuration theory can serve as a sensitizing critical device for evaluating and showing the theoretical significance of widely different types of empirical research. Nevertheless, given the elaborateness (and what sometimes seems to be the over-elaborateness) of the multiple concepts and distinctions of structuration theory, one sometimes suspects that Giddens himself is guilty of the mischievous practice of 'operating with a welter of abstract concepts'.

The flaws mentioned above are to be expected in a theoretical perspective

that is as elaborate and comprehensive as structuration theory. Many of these difficulties can be resolved by subjecting structuration theory to the rigorous criticism that it deserves. Giddens, who continually refines his concepts and distinctions, has demonstrated his ability to respond creatively to criticisms. (See for example his refinement of the senses and varieties of 'constraint' in chapter 4 of *The Constitution of Society*.) But I want to concentrate on one area where many of these problems come into sharp focus, and where there is evidence of serious confusion and conflicting tendencies. It concerns Giddens's reflections on social science as critique – 'structuration theory is intrinsically incomplete if not linked to a conception of social science as critical theory' (p. 287). Yet in tracking down what Giddens means by critique and critical theory, we discover not only ambiguity and vagueness, but conflicting and even contradictory claims. In fairness to Giddens, it should be noted that he has frankly admitted that he has not 'really worked out in any detail' how he is going to tackle the relevant issues.⁵ My concern is not primarily with what he has left unsaid, but with what he does say.

To locate the specific problematic issues, two preliminary sets of remarks are necessary. The first concerns how Giddens understands 'theory' when he speaks of social, sociological or critical theory. The second deals with what he considers to be a mistaken or inadequate conception of critical theory. For Giddens is clearer about what he is 'against' than what he is 'for'.

(1) As a benchmark, let me return to Merton's conception of scientific theory – a conception which owes a great deal to the analysis of scientific theory by the logical empiricists. One 'virtue' of this conception of theory is its relative clarity about what does and does not constitute a 'legitimate' scientific theory. For Merton, theory consists of those concepts, distinctions, postulates and theorems that form a deductive system. Theories are used to explain empirical phenomena because 'scientific laws' can be *derived* from theories; and these laws in turn can be confirmed or disconfirmed by empirical generalizations. Theory is *not* to be understood as '*consisting of general orientations toward data, suggesting types of variables which need somehow to be taken into account . . .*' Theory consists of '*clear, verifiable statements of relationships between specified variables*' (p. 9: italics in the original). Theory is not to be confused with methodology, or with a miscellaneous 'analysis of sociological concepts' such as status, role, *Gemeinschaft*, social interaction, *anomie*, etc. Nor does theory consist of '*post factum* sociological interpretations' (p. 90) which can account for almost any data. Theory, 'properly speaking', is formulated on the model of hypothetical-deductive explanation.⁶

Giddens, drawing upon the critiques of this conception of theory by post-

⁵ For Giddens's reflections on critical theory and the critical function of social science, see his interview 'Historical Materialism Today: An Interview with Anthony Giddens', in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 1 (1982), 63–77.

⁶ See my critical discussion of Merton's conception of social theory in *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), pp. 7–18.

empiricist philosophers of science, rejects it as too narrow, limiting and distortive. Ironically, much of what Merton tells us does not belong to theory *proper* is (when stripped of its negative connotations) included in Giddens's notion of theory. For Giddens, theory or a theoretical orientation is much more open-textured than Merton or the logical empiricists suggest. Giddens makes a rough heuristic distinction between 'sociological theory' and 'social theory'.

I use the term 'social theory' to encompass issues that I hold to be the concern of all the social sciences. These issues are to do with the nature of human action and the acting self; with how interaction should be conceptualized and its relation to institutions; and with grasping the practical connotations of social analysis. I understand 'sociology', by contrast, to be not a generic discipline to do with the study of human societies as a whole, but that branch of social science which focuses particularly upon the 'advanced' or modern societies. Such a disciplinary characterization implies an intellectual division of labour, nothing more. While there are theorems and concepts which belong distinctively to the industrialized world, there is no way in which something called 'sociological theory' can be clearly distinguished from the more general concepts and concerns of social theory.

'Social theory' is not a term which has any precision, but it is a very useful one for all that. As I represent it, 'social theory' involves the analysis of issues which spill over into philosophy, but it is not primarily a philosophical endeavor . . . Social theory has the task of providing conceptions of the nature of human social activity and of the human agent which can be placed in the service of empirical work. The main concern of social theory is the same as that of the social sciences in general: the illumination of concrete processes of social life. (pp. xvi-xvii)

I have cited the above passage at such length not only because it conveys the flavour of Giddens's understanding of social and sociological theory, but also because it shows how sharply he departs from more 'precise', 'limiting', 'restrictive' logical empiricist conceptions of theory. We can see how far Giddens is from logical empiricists (and an earlier generation of methodologically self-conscious social scientists) who were obsessed with the problem of sharply demarcating scientific theory from what is taken to be non-scientific or pseudo-scientific speculation. But this more open-textured conception of theory harbours its own problems. It is so open that one has difficulty discerning what does and does not belong to a theoretical orientation.

(2) Giddens clearly wants to distance himself from the specific conception of 'critical theory' employed by the Frankfurt School, and especially as it is used by Jürgen Habermas. He categorically rejects 'the programme of grounding critical theory because I want to set up the idea of two houses, neither of which is a safe house, the factual and the moral critical house that you move between'.⁷ He tells us 'I use the term critical theory, but I don't really have in

⁷ See 'Historical Materialism Today', 74.

mind anything that has connections with Frankfurt writings from which the term obviously springs.⁸ But informing us about what he is 'against' and why he opposes it does not yet clarify what he is advocating.

I want to follow the strategy of, so to speak, firing critical salvos into reality and attempting to focus them around those issues that I mentioned before: the distinctiveness of the modern world, the implications of that by contrast to the traditional world, what this leaves in the way of obvious formulae for political theory and then how one can, as it were, spin a web around them. I don't really think that I'd support any programme of trying to ground critical theory, but nor will I support the opposite, that is the idea of a purely immanent critique or ungroundable form of critique. I would probably work more from within a sociological conception which would seem to me to suggest that some things are clearly noxious and other things are clearly desirable and that it isn't necessary to ground them in order to proclaim this to be so.⁹

But however attractive one may find this pluralistic and foxlike understanding of critique, one can still have the uneasy feeling that Giddens is not facing, but rather, dodging, some tough issues. Let me pursue this in detail.

Sometimes in speaking of the critical function of social science, Giddens appeals to what may be labelled the 'minimalist' conception of critique. Any theoretical orientation, no matter how open it is, which has *some* determinate content will rule out some other theoretical orientations. In this minimal sense, every theory has a critical import. If, for example, we accept structuration theory as valid, then we must reject functionalism or structuralism. But not only is this minimalist sense of critique reversible (if functionalism is valid, then we would reject structuration theory); it is a characteristic of theory in every discipline. So this minimalist conception, although quite important when assessing *specific* competing theories, does not carry us very far in grasping what if anything is distinctive about critical social science.

Sometimes Giddens confuses the issue of the *practical* consequences of social science on the social world with its *critical* impact. This is evident in his appeal to the example of Machiavelli's discourse on the state and sovereignty – an example he uses in *The Constitution of Society* (pp. 350–4) and in other writings. His basic point is that the very concepts of state and sovereignty forged by Machiavelli became constitutive of the social reality that individuals confronted. Human beings began to think and act in a 'new' social reality. This example is intended to illustrate the 'massive practical impact on the social world' of social thinking. Now although I agree with much of what Giddens says about Machiavelli and the ways in which his discourse was appropriated and embodied in social reality, I *fail* to see how this is sufficient to clarify the critical function of social science and theory. Giddens does show that social science is not merely epiphenomenal, that it can and does have practical influences, even a massive impact on our everyday lives. But did we need Giddens to tell us this? Consider the many ways in which classical and

⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.