Introduction

There have been fundamental changes in the past three decades, both on the level of social theory, and on the level of the social realities that this theory tries to describe and explain. Concerning the former we have witnessed a post-positivist/anti-foundationalist as well as a linguistic/cultural turn. With regard to the latter, the abrupt opening of world markets (particularly financial ones) in combination with the new information technologies has led to a type of neoliberal globalization within which nation-states have had to change profoundly both their internal structures and their external strategies in their attempts to thrive or even just survive in a new, highly competitive world order.

For some social theorists the above changes have been so radical that the term 'modern' should be replaced by the term 'postmodern' – both on the level of second-order theoretical discourses, and on the more practical one of first-order laypersons' discursive and non-discursive practices. Hence the talk about postmodern theory and postmodern society: a social order within which the belief systems and the collective certainties of early modernity have evaporated – this state of affairs leading to constant references to the 'death of the subject', the 'end of history', the 'dissolution of metaphysics', the 'implosion of the social', the 'eclipse of the political', etc.[1]

Against this hyperbolic tendency to exaggerate partial trends to the point of showing them as totally dominant, other theorists (including myself) consider that the term *late*-modern rather than postmodern is a more appropriate characterization of present-day society and theory.[2] Since there are strong continuities between the old and the new, the logic

[1] For a critique of the postmodern declarations on the various 'deaths' (of the subject, history, metaphysics), see Benhabib, 1992.

[2] For a position which stresses the continuity between the modern and the late modern, see Giddens 1990, 1991. For structural similarities between the transitions from pre-modernity to modernity and from modernity to late modernity, see McLennan, 2003.

of modernity has not been interrupted or transcended, it has merely been accelerated. Moreover, certain theoretical themes (like relativism, anti-essentialism, anti-foundationalism), or cultural (pessimism, nostalgia, irony) or socio-structural ones (e.g. the notion of flows, networks, simulacra) – all these elements are to be found both in the old and in the new social order, albeit in different combinations and with different weights given to the specific elements. This being so, the central issue is less one of how the new replaces the vanishing old, and more how the new *articulates* with the persisting old.[3]

As regards sociological theory – the main concern of this book – I believe that there is a strong need not to turn our backs on classical theory or on the type of conceptual tools that Talcott Parsons (the father of modern sociological theory) bequeathed to us during the early post-war period. There is also a need to avoid not only discontinuity but also the type of compartmentalization of the numerous theoretical paradigms that developed partly in reaction to the Parsonian synthesis, and partly in response to the new global social developments. (In the text, when reference is made to societies I use the term late- rather than postmodern. On the other hand, when reference is made to theories, given the standard usage and in order to avoid confusion, I use either the rather awkward term late/postmodern or simply postmodern.)[4]

The essays contained in the present volume are tentative attempts to build bridges between modern and late-modern/postmodern theoretical developments, with the aim not of reversing the growing theoretical division of labour or the growing differentiation between various approaches to the social, but of combating compartmentalization and enhancing inter-paradigmatic communication. This entails a twofold task:

– *negatively*, eliminating obstacles that prevent the move from agency to structure/system, from micro to macro, from economic/political to socio-cultural analysis and vice versa;

[3] For theories emphasizing the need to replace the old with new conceptual tools more useful for the study of postmodernity, see Urry, 2000a, 2000b; Bauman, 1987, 1992.

[4] 'Post-structuralist' is a term which is often used interchangeably with 'postmodern'. In what follows it will only be used for the characterization of theories which reject the surface-depth distinction underlying various structuralist approaches.

– more *positively*, reconstructing already existing conceptual tools in an effort to move from theoretical compartmentalization and/or mere *juxtaposition* to the effective *articulation* of different perspectives, modern and late-modern/postmodern.

The volume is divided into five parts.

Part I ('The theoretical background: the development of the agency–structure problematic') gives a bird's-eye view of those postwar theoretical developments that are relevant to the issues examined in the rest of the book. In dealing with Parsons' theoretical synthesis and the numerous reactions to it, the focus is on the way agency and structure/system are conceptualized. Starting from a critique of Parsons' systemic overemphasis in his middle and late work, I very briefly examine the reaffirmation by interpretative sociologies of the agentic qualities of laypersons, as well as the linguistically and culturally informed attempts to decentre the subject via a focus on hidden codes, subjectless practices and texts/narratives. I also refer critically to two major attempts at a post-Parsonian synthesis, those by Giddens and Bourdieu. These two theorists have tried to transcend the subjectivist–objectivist, actor–structure divide in the social sciences, a divide which has pitted interpretatively orientated sociologies (like those of symbolic interactionism, phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology) against more objective approaches (structural functionalism, structuralism and post-structuralism).

Part II ('Parsonian and post-Parsonian developments') tries to show the continuing utility as well as the serious limitations of some basic conceptual tools Parsons has offered us by looking at the way in which he has described and explained the spread of individual rights in Western societies (chapter 2), as well as how he has used the notion of evolutionary universals in an attempt to assess the chances of democratization in the pre-1989 East-European communist regimes (chapter 3). Part II also reviews the work of two authors (Alexander's in chapter 4, and Joas' in chapter 5) who, while taking Parsons' work seriously, have tried to reformulate it in ways which acknowledge the theoretical developments that became important after the American theorist's death.

Part III ('Agency and structure: reworking some basic conceptual tools') starts by examining the way in which the key distinction between social and system integration has been conceptualized by Lockwood, Habermas and Giddens. I argue that Lockwood's conceptualization, if

partially reformulated, is the most useful one for the task of bridging actor- and system-orientated approaches in the social sciences (chapter 6). Part III continues with an essay which argues against the abolition or the transcendence of the subjectivist–objectivist divide in the social sciences (chapter 7). Finally, this part examines Bourdieu's notion of habitus and its connection with that of reflexivity, in a tentative attempt to restructure his theory of practice in such a way that teleological functionalism is avoided (chapter 8).

Part IV ('Bridges between modern and late/postmodern theorizing') tries to bring the modern and late-modern perspectives closer together by:

- elaborating the notion of modernity in such a way as to meet the postmodern objection about its Eurocentric character (chapter 9);
- exploring the issue of ethical relativism, taking a middle position between attempts to establish the transhistorical/universal validity of certain values, and those rejecting principles related to human rights as Eurocentric and as instances of cultural imperialism (chapter 10);
- considering the issue of cognitive relativism, again taking a middle position between positivistic and relativistic, postmodern modes of social analysis (chapter 11);
- developing an intermediate position between social constructionism and critical realism (chapter 12).

The bridging exercise continues in part V ('Towards a non-essentialist holism'). Here an effort is made to bring closer together the late/post-modern anti-essentialist orientation with the type of holistic conceptual frameworks which underlie conventional political economy and macro-sociology – frameworks useful to those interested in the examination of how social wholes (formal organizations, communities, nation-states, global social formations) are constituted, reproduced and transformed (chapters 13 to 16).

The volume ends with an appendix ('In defence of "grand" historical sociology'). In this I defend the comparative macro-analyses of historically oriented sociologists such as Moore, Mann and Skocpol against a rather positivistically oriented, empiricist rejection of their writings.

It is important to stress here that the volume is not a textbook. Although part I deals with the development of postwar social theory, its main focus is on a single issue – that of the agency–structure problematic. Neither is the text a set of disconnected articles. It consists of a

number of interrelated essays all of which, directly or indirectly, focus on ongoing debates between modern and postmodern theories – they also focus on ways to bridge the gap between them. More specifically, all chapters either examine issues crucial for the above debates, such as Eurocentrism, ethical relativism, cognitive relativism, etc.; or, on a more abstract level, explore the agency–structure problematic and its relevance for bringing closer together modern/holistic and postmodern anti-holistic, anti-essentialist approaches. This is a rather urgent task.

At a time when social scientists, by focusing on culture, discourses and the construction of identities, have turned their backs to the type of macro-transformations that have radically changed the face of the globe; at a time when holistic approaches (in the political economy and historical macro-sociology tradition) are rejected as essentialist and/or as having authoritarian connotations, it is vital to show that one can use holistic conceptual tools while avoiding essentialism as well as authoritarianism.

In a more general way this book is the end result of a continuous attempt, during the four decades of my career as a sociologist, to resolve theoretical puzzles and to construct or reformulate concepts which can help social researchers to avoid empiricism and to explore, in a theoretically relevant and empirically sound manner, the way in which social wholes work and the way in which they change. It is a synthesis of my previous endeavours in social theorizing (*Post-Marxist Alternatives*, *Back to Sociological Theory*, *Sociological Theory: What Went Wrong?*); it is also an attempt, against present, fashionable, postmodern trends, to show that some of the conceptual tools that classical sociology, as well as the Parsonian tradition of modern social theory, have given us are still useful for understanding the world in which we live.

Finally, I wish to make some brief remarks about the book's overall organization.

Part I (the very long chapter 1), which provides the general background, and the concluding part V (chapters 13 to 16), which tries to link together the various threads of the 'bridging' argument, have not been published before. In parts II–IV some of the essays have already been published, as mentioned in the initial footnote to the appropriate chapters. I have, however, modified them in order to show how each chapter is linked to other chapters and to the book's overall theme.

Concerning the mode of exposition, I have tried to strike a balance between two antithetical requirements: avoiding excessive repetition on

the one hand and maintaining the self-contained character of each essay on the other. So in some chapters I have eliminated arguments already extensively discussed earlier, but mention where they can be found. In other cases, I have not eliminated, but shortened, points already discussed, so that the main argument can be grasped without the reader having to refer to previous chapters.

Finally, I have tried to make the major points of the book as clear as possible by providing concrete and straightforward examples to illustrate abstract arguments, and by putting more technical points in footnotes.

PART I

The theoretical background: the development of the agency–structure problematic

1 *From Parsons' to Giddens' synthesis*

Introduction

The development of the social sciences in general and of sociology in particular is inextricably linked with the emergence and consolidation of the nation-state in nineteenth-century Europe. The nation-state and the more general modern social organization it entails have two basic dimensions that distinguish it from all pre-modern social formations:

(i) the decline of segmental localism and the massive mobilization/inclusion of the population in the national centre.[1] This 'bringing in' process entails the concentration of the means of not only economic but also political, social and cultural production at the top; as well as the shifting of attachments and orientations from the traditional, non-differentiated community to what Anderson (1991) has called the 'imaginary community' of the nation-state;

(ii) the top to bottom differentiation of the societal whole into distinct institutional spheres, each portraying its own logic, values and historical dynamic. This differentiation, unlike that of complex, pre-modern social formations, is not confined to the top but reaches the social base or periphery as well.[2]

Classical sociologists have tried to understand the social realities resulting from the British Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution by focusing holistically on the above two major features of modernity. Spencer (1972) and Durkheim (1964), for instance,

[1] On the decline of segmental localism and its linkages with the emergence of the nation-state and nationalism, see Gellner, 1969: 147–78; 1996. For the process of mobilization/inclusion into the national centre, see Bendix, 1969.

[2] For the concept of differentiation and its linkage to modernity, see Parsons, 1966, 1977; Eisenstadt, 1990a, 1990b. For the segmental character of the social base in pre-modern, complex social formations, see Marx, 1859/1964; Hindess and Hirst, 1975.

explored differentiation as a major feature of the evolutionary process leading to the emergence of modern societies. Marx (1859/1970) and Weber (1925/1978), without neglecting differentiation, emphasized more how the centralizing, bureaucratizing aspects of the bringing-in process led to an unprecedented concentration of the means of production and domination at the top.

Marxist political economy is the discipline's holistic framework *par excellence*. More than any other paradigm it raises questions about the constitution, reproduction and transformation of whole social formations, particularly capitalist ones. One of its major features is striking a balance between a systemic/'externalist' and an actor/'internalist' perspective.[3] As Lockwood (1964) puts it, in Marx's overall work we see a combination of *system-integration* and *social-integration* views of how societies persist and change. Questions are asked about the logical compatibilities and incompatibilities of institutional complexes (e.g. contradictions between technology and the institution of private property), as well as about how actors react or fail to react to such incompatibilities. It is true of course that, as Althusser (1969) has pointed out, Marx's early work puts more emphasis on actors and their struggles, whereas in his late work the focus is more on systemic contradictions and the tendential 'laws of motion' of a mode of production. But, as I will argue more extensively in chapter 16, looking at his *oeuvre* as a whole, there is no doubt that its conceptual framework helps us view the social both in systemic and in actor terms – without conflating the two approaches and without reducing the one to the other.

This is not to deny that there are serious drawbacks in the Marxist holistic framework. It is based on an economistic view of social differentiation that leads, in aprioristic fashion, to the systematic underemphasis of non-economic institutional spheres and their specific logics. It also leads to the underemphasis of actors' struggles over the non-economic means of social construction (political, cultural).

Of course, humanist and voluntaristic versions of Marxism have tried to overcome economism by stressing the relative autonomy of the political or the ideological. But in so far as they continue to conceptualize and analyse the non-economic levels by the use of economic categories (such as class, reproductive requirements of capital, etc.), they have not succeeded in overcoming economic reductionism (Mouzelis, 1990).

[3] For the internalist/externalist distinction, see Habermas, 1987.

If the balance between an action and a systemic perspective is marred by economism, critics have also pointed out difficulties in terms of macro–micro linkages. Marxism, focusing on such macro-phenomena as class struggles, mass movements, revolutions, etc., has neglected to show how these relate to the actions and interactions of concrete individuals in the context of their everyday existence; it has failed, in other words, to provide micro-foundations of societal stability and change.[4] This failure is responsible, say the critics, for essentialism, for the reification of social structures, for a view of society as a mystical entity pulling all the strings behind the actors' backs. Moreover, essentialism is reinforced by Marx's philosophical materialism – both leading to a constant reference by Marxists to material structures, material conditions, material struggles. This accent on the material goes strongly against the linguistic and cultural trend in the social sciences today, against the growing realization that all aspects of social life, from ideologies to stock markets, are symbolically constructed (see chapter 12).

The decline of the Marxist macro-holistic framework is not, of course, exclusively due to its theoretical weaknesses. A full explanation must link intra- with extra-theoretical developments, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the generalized crisis of the Left, the neoliberal character of present-day globalization, etc. But the *internal* logic and dynamic of the debates of how societal wholes are constituted, reproduced and transformed is also important to the understanding of not only the decline of Marxism but, more to the point, the theoretical failure to replace it with a less economistic and less essentialist holism – a holism useful for raising in a theoretically coherent manner questions about the functioning and transformation of nation-states in today's globalized, late modernity.

If, as I believe, it is true that globalization does not lead to the decline or disappearance of the nation-state but to a radical change in its functions, it is also true that at present we lack the conceptual tools for systematically studying either this transformation or the global system within which nation-states are embedded. This is to say that even in late modernity, the need persists for an investigation of nation-states and their development within the global system. The present 'anti-foundationalist' postmodern trend in the social sciences, however,

[4] For the concept of micro-foundations and its linkage to the micro–macro distinction, see Collins, 1981a, 1981b; Mouzelis, 1991b: 80–8.