

1 Introduction

This book is a critique of a critique. In other words, it is a defence. It defends that form of action theory with which Weber's name has traditionally been associated; one which presumes that action refers to behaviour possessed of a subjective meaning. It follows that the object of my attack is that critique of this position which has been mounted over the past twenty to thirty years by the proponents of a newer, 'social', form of action theory. One that has come to the fore as a result of what has been called the micro-sociological revolution of the 1970s and early 1980s (although this phrase is rather misleading as those perspectives that rose to prominence at this time were actually less specifically 'micro' than 'interactional' in character). For it was generally proponents of these perspectives who took it upon themselves to launch an attack on the traditional idea of action, aided in large part by certain post-Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophers and philosophers of action. The critique that they launched can now be judged, from the standpoint of the 1990s, to have been successful. For one can say that most contemporary sociologists, at least in Britain, now accept this critique as valid. This would appear to be just as true of those sociologists who do not adopt a micro or interactional perspective as of those who do. Consequently to reject this critique and defend the traditional theory of action is, in effect, to attack contemporary sociology in general.

Now I have long believed that sociology should be a broad church discipline, one which permits its members to study any aspect of any social phenomena in any manner they wish; so long, that is, as the rights of subjects are respected. Consequently I do not approve of those sectarian disputes that regularly break out between those who hold to differing versions of the 'one and only true faith' that is sociology. Not only do I see little point in telling my fellow professionals that they are wrong to be doing whatever it is they are doing (even if I should think it), but I expect fellow sociologists to be tolerant of my own preferred interpretations and practices. However, unfortunately, sociology is not

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always (or even often) animated by such a liberal and tolerant spirit. Those who wish to promote their own approach to the study of social life often find it convenient to do so by exaggerating, or even inventing, deficiencies in those schools of thought or perspectives that currently prevail. This, it seems to me, was the situation in the 1970s and early 1980s, when advocates of the new micro-sociologies frequently matched some of their harshest critics in the degree to which they manifested intolerance. More crucial, however, was the way in which they represented their specific understanding of the nature of sociology as one which was *necessitated*, and indeed largely *justified*, by what they identified as incoherences and inadequacies in the premises that had long guided action theory. Hence the case commonly presented for doing various forms of ethnomethodology, phenomenology, Goffman-style dramaturgical analysis, and even some forms of symbolic interactionism, was, at the same time, represented as the case against the traditional form of Weberian action theory.

As a Weberian myself naturally I found such negative claims extremely disturbing – so much so that I was stung into formulating my own response. This book is the result of that response, and I feel it important to stress that my primary intention in writing it was to defend my own position, not to attack that of others. However, in practice, such a distinction is hard to make and especially in the latter part of the book, defence slips easily into attack.

The origins of a critique

In fact most of the arguments deployed in the book pre-date my irritation with the micro-sociological critique, and have their origins in the research undertaken for *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. As the title implies, that work was modelled on Weber's famous essay on Protestantism and capitalism, and followed a period in which I studied Weber's work very closely. This was not only an interesting and rewarding exercise but one that led me to develop some ideas of my own concerning the study of action. It was therefore with the principal intention of working out the full implications of these that I began work on this book in the early 1980s. However, I quickly realised that the Weberian vision of sociology which I was intent on developing was no longer one which I shared with my colleagues in the discipline. For although most of them still professed to hold him in high esteem – often claiming to find his work a source of inspiration – in practice they no longer adopted Weber's programme for the discipline. Indeed, they no longer held to his definition of its subject-matter; nor, as he did,

regarded 'motivational understanding' of human conduct as central to the discipline.

Consequently I was forced to turn my attention to the beliefs of my fellow sociologists and to their strange abandonment of what were, to me, central features of the interpretive action tradition. Two developments in particular concerned me since they seemed to undermine this tradition completely. These were the widespread belief that actors' reports of their conduct could not be employed as a resource with which to understand their actions, and the abandonment of the study of motive for the study of motive talk. Hence I began to gather material concerning the arguments advanced to justify abandoning the classic action theory position on these two critical issues. Gradually, after devoting a good deal of time to studying the writings of a variety of sociologists, I became aware that I was encountering the same arguments over and over again, no matter from which micro-sociological perspective these tenets were being attacked. Not only that, but each writer appeared to share the same underlying assumptions and premises concerning action, accounts, meaning and, indeed, the discipline as a whole. This was somewhat surprising as I was reading material by sociologists who belonged to such different theoretical traditions as phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology. However, it did appear that there was a single common position – in effect, a paradigm – underlying all the current micro-sociologies, one which provided the basic rationale for rejecting the classic action theory position. This realisation led me to shift my focus of attention from the specific arguments with which I had started to the more general position which, it now appeared, underlay them all.

The dogma of social situationalism

It was not easy to study this paradigm, however, for although what one might call its negative features (that is, the case against Weberian action theory) were readily apparent, its more positive ones were less obvious. Thus, whilst the representatives of each known, named, micro-sociology, were usually eager enough to outline what made their particular tradition of inquiry unique, they were, perhaps understandably, less concerned to identify what it was that they all had in common. Indeed, it was not clear that such spokespersons were necessarily fully aware of what this might be, for this shared paradigm appeared to consist of mainly taken-for-granted assumptions. Faced with this difficulty I decided to try and stand back from my material, in order if possible to see this larger picture more clearly. To help me in this I turned to an examination of sociology

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textbooks and dictionaries. By studying these, and in particular by comparing their contents over time, I believed that I could discern more clearly just what these taken-for-granted assumptions might be. Textbooks and dictionaries are, I believe, very useful in this respect as they tend to reveal a discipline's prevailing dogmas (as well as some of the contradictions and ambiguities to which they give rise) more clearly than any other form of writing. The result of this exercise was that I was able to give 'my enemy' – that is to say, the positive form of the critique of Weberianism – a name. I was able to identify it as 'social situationalism'.

In the pages that follow the principal tenets of social situationalism are identified as the definition of the subject-matter of sociology as 'social action' (which is, in turn, taken to mean conduct which has 'a social meaning'), whilst such meanings are presumed to be constituted and defined by social situations. These are tenets which have the effect of defining the subject-matter of sociology as situated conduct rather than action in the conventional sense, and hence serve to explain why Weber's position is rejected. Now, as indicated, these tenets would appear to be so widely accepted by contemporary sociologists that most of them do not see them as contentious. Rather, they simply take them for granted, such that these beliefs have the status of dogma.

Indeed, it is revealing to consider what the most taken-for-granted premise in contemporary sociology might be. For I would propose that it is the claim that 'social action' constitutes its principal subject-matter. Certainly a perusal of textbooks would provide strong support for such a claim (see the discussion in chapter 3). Of course, one can find other definitions; ones in which alternatives such as 'society' or even 'social structure' are mentioned. Yet these are exceptions. There is little doubt that social action is the most favoured term. However, it is also the case that this central, defining, concept is not the subject of much discussion. Indeed, it is rarely defined. Rather its status as the term best suited to define the subject-matter of the discipline is simply taken-for-granted. Most sociologists would appear to regard the statement as entirely self-evident; obviously *sociology* consists of the study of *social* action – what could be more obvious? One imagines that sociologists of most theoretical persuasions (or indeed, of none) would probably have little difficulty agreeing with it. Perhaps the fact that such a high degree of consensus exists in a discipline otherwise noted for its intellectual discord, schismatic tendencies and widespread theoretical eclecticism, should be taken as grounds for celebration. Unfortunately, it is far more likely that agreement in this respect stems from the extensive latitude with which this term is, in practice, interpreted. Something which in turn stems from the remarkable lack of discussion over its actual meaning.

Indeed, there is a certain irony here which non-sociologists especially might well appreciate. It is that whilst sociologists are among the most vociferous advocates of 'reflexivity' on the part of academics and researchers, and hence among the first to criticise practitioners of other academic disciplines for failing in this respect, they seem largely to have failed to follow their own advice in this case. For, with a very few exceptions, sociologists in general rarely appear to reflect on the precise meaning and hence suitability of the very concept which is used to define the subject-matter of their own discipline. Not surprisingly, a climate in which there is such a widespread lack of reflection and hence discussion is also one in which taken-for-granted assumptions become entrenched as dogmas. It is the central thesis of this book that such dogmas now constitute a major obstacle to further progress.

An outline of the book

The book commences with a brief survey of the current state of 'action theory' within the discipline, together with evidence of how the classic Weberian conceptual trichotomy of action, behaviour and social action has been replaced by the modern dichotomy of behaviour and social action. Then the rise of social situationalism is charted, prior to outlining and then confronting each of the principal arguments which situationalists employ in order to try and exclude the study of subjective meaning from the discipline. These are identified as first, the argument by denial; second, the argument through exclusion; and third, the argument through incorporation. In addition, specific chapters are devoted to such critical issues in the confrontation between the action and social action perspectives as: actions and accounts (especially motives); the claim that individuals learn everything from others; and the significance accorded to language and communicative acts. Finally, although this book is largely critical in tone some comments are made in the last chapter concerning the direction which a revived, and 'de-situationalised', action theory might take.

The author's position

The general support which is manifest here for the traditional form of action theory should not be taken as implying that my own position is identical with Weber's or, indeed, for that matter, with any of the other main exponents of this tradition. My own understanding of this form of analysis differs in certain critical respects from that outlined by such theorists as Talcott Parsons or Alfred Schutz, or at least from the positions

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which are usually attributed to them. This is true in two crucial respects. First, in the treatment of rational action as the norm (if not also as the ideal), against which all other forms of action are to be judged; and secondly, in the exclusion of any concern with behaviour. My own view of action theory is that it is necessarily only part of a wider theory of conduct, and hence must embrace the study of behaviour, whilst I consider that there are no good grounds for according rational action a privileged place in any conceptual scheme. However, it is my contention that, despite these caveats, my position is still 'Weberian' in essence.

This does not mean that I endorse Weber's view of sociology unreservedly. In fact, some criticisms of his conceptual distinctions are made in the course of the discussion that follows, and my own position differs from his in at least one crucial respect. This is that I consider 'social action' to be a redundant concept. This is not, however, to my mind, a matter of great moment, since I do not believe that this concept is as central to Weber's conceptual and theoretical scheme as sociologists commonly imply. But then sociologists are noted for their ability to differ with each other over the correct interpretation of Weber's writings and hence this contention should surprise no one. This is not the place to provide all the details which I believe justify this claim, so I shall content myself with observing that whenever I have been at a loss to know how best to resolve those ambiguities which all readers encounter in Weber's work, I have generally tried to resolve them by paying more attention to what might be called his 'applied' work (especially perhaps, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), than to his rather cryptic observations on the nature of sociology. It is my belief that if one approaches Weber's work in this way, one will arrive at the conclusion that 'action', and not 'social action', is the more significant concept.

A final caveat

Arguments concerning theories of action – together with those conceptions of the individual actor which these theories contain – constitute the principal subject-matter of this book. However, the fact that it is limited to these topics should not be taken as implying that I consider the subject-matter of sociology to comprise no more than this. Thus, although I criticise contemporary sociologists for defining the subject-matter of the discipline as social action, and argue strongly that it should be action, this does not mean that I would be content with a definition which stated that sociology is merely the study of action. On the contrary, although grounded in such a study, I believe that the discipline should include investigation of social interaction, social institutions, social

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structures, in addition, critically, to cultural systems. How precisely the study of these phenomena should be related to the study of action (especially as envisaged in the final chapter) is a question I hope to answer in a subsequent work.

2 Action reported missing in action theory

It has become a commonplace for sociologists to observe that there is no action in Parsons' famous voluntaristic theory of action or action schema. Either they argue that his elaborate and analytic model never did actually find room for action as such, or else they argue that whatever merit it might have had in this respect was only contained in *The Structure of Social Action* (first published in 1937) and that this early promise was not fulfilled in his later work. But perhaps this view embodies a judgement which is unfair to Talcott Parsons; not because, as some have claimed, that his is indeed a genuine theory of action, but rather because there is no action in *any* of the existing, designated 'theories of action' in the discipline of sociology.¹ Parsons is certainly not the only theorist against whom such an accusation can be levelled. It can equally be argued, for example, that Alfred Schutz's phenomenologically inspired 'theory of action' is really only a theory of meaning, whilst symbolic interactionism is merely concerned with individuals who 'name' objects, people and events or 'negotiate meaning' with others rather than with people who 'act'. In a similar vein one can argue that the actor in Goffman's dramaturgical model is portrayed as 'impressing others' through the manner of their action rather than accomplishing the action itself. Finally, what are commonly described as 'rational actor' and 'rational choice' theories can be seen to be little more than perspectives for studying forms of decision-making rather than frameworks for the analysis of action. Indeed, the judgement that the majority of 'action theories' do not, in practice, really address the phenomenon of 'action' is one which it is hard to avoid no matter which perspective is under examination. Perhaps, therefore, sociologists should no longer single out Parsonian action theory for special comment in the way they do, but report instead that action is missing in action theory as a whole.

It will be argued in the pages that follow that this is not an entirely unreasonable conclusion, even if it does require some qualification. For it would appear that the action theory tradition within sociology has

lost its way, with sociologists straying far from both the spirit and the form of Weber's original enterprise. The promise contained in that early programme has, like Parsons', simply not been fulfilled. What is more, it will be argued that there is little likelihood that this promise will be fulfilled in the near future so long as sociologists strive to develop 'action theories' which have little connection with Weber's original concept of action. For the essence of his vision was the belief that the key to explaining human conduct lay in adopting the actor's point of view and hence in focusing on that subjective perspective which was the very defining feature of action. However, despite the general impression given in sociology textbooks that Weber's action theory relates closely to current theories, together with the widespread approval which many sociologists still accord to his work, few, if any, contemporary sociologists actually adopt his approach to the study of action.

What is action theory?

But before developing this gloomy diagnosis any further it might be sensible to outline what the term 'action theory' conventionally covers, as it would be unwise to treat its meaning as self-evident. In fact the term is used to cover a diverse and far from coherent tradition of work, not just in sociology but also in the social and behavioural sciences more generally. Yet apart from a readiness to accord prominence to the concept of action it is not always obvious what these different strands of theorising have in common. On the surface what appears to unite them is an acknowledgement that their approach has been influenced by the work of earlier action theorists, with Weber (closely followed by Parsons) most commonly nominated as the principal source of inspiration. Indeed if we consult sociology textbooks we can discover that characteristically its pedigree is traced from the early work of Weber and, to a lesser extent, Pareto and Simmel, through to that of Parsons and Schutz. But it is Weber and Parsons who are the two sociologists most commonly identified as action theorists, although among those identified at one time or another as contributors to this tradition have been F. von Mises, Karl Marx, George Herbert Mead, W. I. Thomas, Vilfredo Pareto, Georg Simmel, Alfred Schutz, Herbert Blumer, George C. Homans, Harold Garfinkel and even Erving Goffman. Among contemporary sociologists Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens are those most commonly described as action theorists. Usually commentators are content to observe that action theory is identified by its distinctive subject-matter, which is 'action' or meaningful, voluntary behaviour, as distinct from mere (and therefore 'meaningless' and involuntary)

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behaviour. Sometimes, however, this theoretical tradition is identified less by its distinctive subject-matter than by what Weber regarded as its distinctive method, that of *verstehen*.² It is thus in this guise that it is identified with 'the actor's standpoint', or 'taking the actor's point of view'; although rather confusingly, the terms 'the action frame of reference', or 'the action schema' can also refer to Parsons' highly analytic theoretical system.

Not surprisingly, such a broad general theoretical tradition – one which has been developing for over sixty years – is bound to contain within it some significant variations of emphasis. The most obvious of these is that represented by the contrast between the work of Parsons and Schutz. The difference between the versions of action theory formulated by these two principal inheritors of the Weberian mantle has been described as that between the 'positivist' or 'instrumental-objective' tradition on the one side and the 'hermeneutic' or 'interpretive-subjective' on the other.³ The latter, most closely identified with Schutz, sees the primary task of the sociologist to be that of carefully exploring how conduct comes to possess meaning for actors. The positivist tradition, on the other hand, takes its lead from Weber's categorisation of actions and in particular the emphasis which he placed on rational action (*zweckrational*). This has led to a close identification of the meaning of an action with the actor's purposes and the understanding of conduct in terms of a formal means-end schema. Thus although both theoretical traditions trace their origins to Max Weber's work they have drifted so far apart that a meaningful dialogue between them seems to be impossible.⁴ Finally, it should be noted that an independent North American tradition, owing nothing to Max Weber but taking its inspiration from the work of George Herbert Mead, should also be identified as an important part of the action theory tradition. Thus Roscoe C. Hinkle traces the antecedents of an action orientation in American sociology prior to publication of Talcott Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* in 1937, to the work of Florian Znaniecki and Robert M. MacIver, and before them, to the pioneering work of Ward, Giddings, Ross, Small, Cooley, Mead, Thomas, Faris and Park.⁵

Action theory outside sociology

As indicated, however, action theories and interpretive perspectives are not confined to sociology but also exist in other disciplines, and therefore it is necessary to note these together with their possible relationship to developments in sociology itself. Three areas in particular need to be mentioned; these are, the other social sciences, especially economics