

1 Diversity and Continuity in Social Theory

A diversity of theories and perspectives is widely seen as an essential characteristic of sociology and, perhaps, an especially marked feature of contemporary sociology. For many observers, this diversity is a sign of chronic intellectual failure and as an indication of the chaotic state into which the subject has fallen and cannot escape. Sociology, it is concluded, is too undisciplined to be counted a social ‘science’ and cannot be relied upon to produce factual knowledge or to guide practical action. For the more radical commentators this state of affairs is a consequence of the over-enthusiastic establishment during the 1960s of a non-discipline taught and researched by intellectual charlatans. These criticisms of the intellectual claims of sociology have come both from those in other, purportedly more rigorous disciplines and from those outside the academic world. Many in politics and the civil service have added to this the assertion that the diversity of viewpoints is driven by political bias: intellectual choices, they argue, are made not on the basis of logic and evidence but in relation to political preferences and prejudices. Indeed, this claim is usually stated as a view that diversity occurs within a limited range of the political spectrum and that the subject as a whole is characterised by a left-wing bias.¹ Such strong expressions are less marked now than they were thirty years ago, when the British government forced the Social Science Research Council to drop the word ‘science’ from its title and to face a reduced level of funding as the Economic and Social Research Council. The attack against sociology was furthered through the introduction of market considerations to both research and teaching, on the grounds that only practically useful intellectual work should be supported from public funds. Fortunately for sociology, but not for the government, the subject proved one of the most popular consumer choices among students and policy-makers. The neo-liberal market strategy initiated a major expansion in sociology and helped to re-establish its position within policy discourse. Despite this change in the political context of sociology, the suspicion lingers that sociology is insufficiently rigorous and is more concerned

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with exploring theoretical novelty and diversity than establishing well-founded understandings of the ‘real world’.

Many sociologists have themselves enthusiastically embraced the idea of diversity, though they have generally seen this in more positive terms than have the external critics. A plurality of theoretical positions – even if mutually contradictory – is seen as something to be encouraged in the spirit of the Maoist dictum ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend’. Such internal views are based on the belief that there can be no intellectual certainty about social matters – there can be no single scientific truth but rather a plurality of truths. As there is a diversity of standpoints from which to view the social world, so must there be a diversity of theoretical perspectives corresponding to these standpoints. This argument seems to lead inexorably to the view that sociologists must ‘take sides’ in political disputes. Intellectual controversy becomes a reflection of political choice and political standpoint.² Less explicitly political is a position encouraged by the growing influence of post-modernism. This is the view that, because there is no reality to the grand narratives of ‘science’ and ‘truth’, sociology can consist of nothing more than playful intellectual constructions that tell us more about their producers than they do about the external world. Indeed, the very idea of an ‘external world’ may be seen as a product of particular theoretical discoveries.

This acceptance of diversity, whether in radical or more neutral and agnostic form, has been widely embraced by practitioners of academic sociology and has become deeply embedded in school and university curriculums. Rival theories and theorists tend to be presented alongside each other in lectures and textbooks with students left to make their own choices from among them. Marx, Weber, or Durkheim, functionalism, structuralism, or interactionism, structure, conflict, or action: these are presented as the alternatives among which students must choose, with the criteria of choice being left largely unspecified. In this situation, the choice of an approach with which a student feels most comfortable as a way of proceeding may come to be seen as the *de facto* epistemological basis on which theoretical decisions are to be made. Not surprisingly, students may come away from their studies with the idea that all intellectual decisions are merely a matter of mere personal preference. They can be forgiven for concluding that there is a supermarket of sociological ideas from which the sociological consumer can select a preferred theory or perspective and reject all others.

The argument that I try to establish in this book is that this total embrace of diversity involves a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of sociology and of social theory. I argue that while theoretical differences

are a fundamental feature of sociological activity, they are capable of resolution – in principle if not always in practice – through the collection and assessment of relevant empirical data and through rigorous logical argument (see the argument in Letherby *et al.* 2011). However, many apparent ‘theoretical’ differences are not theoretical differences *per se*. These are often differences in a much more limited number of ways of conceptualising social phenomena. Theories of social activity are underpinned by specific conceptualisations that are not, in general, explicitly restated in each particular theory. Any sociological argument does depend on particular conceptualisations of the social world, but these are not tied to theoretical differences in a one-to-one way. It is these ‘perspectives’ or ‘approaches’ that generally figure in courses and textbooks on social theory rather than specific theories themselves. My argument is that such conceptualisations may often be seen more fruitfully as complementary frameworks rather than rival approaches.

It is often the case that strong claims are made for one particular way of conceiving the social world, the implication being that it is the only valid point of view to adopt. However, few such claims can withstand close scrutiny. To argue for the importance of a focus on issues of social interaction, for example, does not mean that an alternative focus on group conflict or individual reflexivity must be rejected *a priori*. Alternative conceptualisations of social phenomena are *prima facie* worthy of consideration as complementary perspectives on the social world. Each illuminates what others ignore or marginalise. They enable the production of ideal-typical constructions that enter into theoretical accounts of the social world, but they never provide the whole picture – if such an idea of the ‘whole picture’ makes any sense at all. This view of sociological diversity rests on the argument that sociology must be, in Mannheim’s (1929) sense, relational rather than relativistic. Perspectives may be related to varying intellectual standpoints but they are not simply relativistic expressions of those standpoints. A dynamic synthesis of theories rooted in diverse conceptual perspectives is the means through which a transcendence of partial theorisations and partisan commitments can be achieved (Scott 1998).

My argument is that sociology has failed to progress as rapidly as it might because of a failure of intellectual cooperation. The achievement of broader understanding and, therefore, the resolution of explanatory differences, has been inhibited by the tendency to maintain exclusive claims to particular conceptual schemes and to one-sided intellectual commitments. Individual sociologists may choose to concentrate their attention on the insights generated from within their preferred conceptualisations, but these cannot be seen as providing an exclusive pathway

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to the truth. Explanatory advances are more likely to result if sociologists also cooperate in a search for complementarities so as to pull together the underlying conceptualisations. Diversity co-exists with an intellectual division of labour in which the explanatory potentials of the various conceptual perspectives are pursued cooperatively as a common intellectual enterprise as the most effective means of theoretical understanding and empirical advance.

This cooperation must rest on the recognition that rival conceptualisations may articulate a common set of *principles* of sociological analysis that can be used in the construction of specific theories. These principles are essential in a discipline that aims to explore social life in all its complexity. The focus on particular perspectives to the neglect of others has meant that crucial principles of explanation have been disregarded. For example, legitimate criticisms of the limits inherent in the systemic focus of structural-functional arguments on education, crime, and religion because of a neglect of action, conflict, or change, have often led to a wholesale denial of all that structural functionalists have argued and an exclusive embrace of one or other of the rival principles. This kind of theoretical rejection ignores the fact that there *are* systemic features in social life and that perspectives based on action, conflict, or change may be equally limited or one-sided in their accounts. Similarly, criticism of individualist approaches to action theory for their neglect of societal-level facts in studies of voting, educational achievement, or mental illness may result in a rejection of action theories and a failure to recognise that individuals and their actions are, indeed, an important feature of many social situations.

A corollary of this tendency to assume the exclusive validity of particular principles of explanation is that intellectual change tends to be driven by fashion. The apparent exhaustion of a conceptual framework leads to the search for an alternative to replace it. When this, too, is exhausted the search begins again. Where intellectual choice is seen as a matter of personal preference, the succession of frameworks is limited by the range of currently fashionable schemas. Each conceptual framework completely replaces its predecessor in the work of its adherents and, as a result, the insights achieved through the use of particular conceptual principles may be lost or marginalised in the collective memory of the current practitioners. Perspectives are abandoned, intellectual fashions move on, and the partial understandings built up in earlier intellectual generations are forgotten. The history of any discipline tends constantly to be rewritten from the standpoint of current concerns, and some theorists and their ideas are written out or marginalised as a new pantheon of theorists and canonical works is constructed.

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that some such apparently novel positions comprise restatements (generally unacknowledged and unrecognised) of positions abandoned during earlier and now forgotten phases of criticism. ‘Culture’ is rediscovered as ‘discourse’, ‘heredity’ is rediscovered as ‘the body’, and so on. Old ideas on culture may be rediscovered by a new generation and hailed as an innovative ‘cultural turn’, and ideas on materiality may be subsequently renewed as an ‘object turn’. Restatements of earlier arguments that do not understand themselves as rediscoveries can only reinforce the apparent chaos and diversity of the discipline and involve a considerable waste of intellectual effort. Rediscoveries and restatements, even in the guise of intellectual novelty, will often add something to the original insights, as the idea of discourse adds something to the idea of culture, but they are likely to be more powerful and productive if generated through a knowledge and appreciation of the earlier insights and with an intention to establish them cooperatively in an intellectual division of labour. Reinventing the wheel is far less productive than retaining and improving on inefficient wheels. New discoveries – new principles – are, of course, possible. Innovation is not always reinvention. The excitement of sociology lies precisely in the discovery and discussion of innovations and novel refinements of more established principles. Such advances can be recognised, however, only if they are seen in relation to the larger disciplinary conspectus from which they emerge.

These issues of fashion and rediscovery are not peculiar to sociology, though they are, perhaps, more marked than they are in other social science disciplines. The reason for this greater prevalence is to be found in the generalising character of sociology as compared with the more specialist social sciences. Sociology as a discipline is concerned with exploring all or any aspects of social life and sociologists have a great variety of conceptual schemes that they can use. Specialist social scientists focus their attention on limited areas of social life and so face fewer issues of rival conceptualisation. Explanatory disputes in those specialised social sciences are more likely to appear as purely technical questions within a shared way of conceptualising the social world.

Theorising in all of the social sciences does, however, have certain common characteristics. The theories produced by sociologists are exercises in ‘social theory’ rather than merely ‘sociological theory’. The latter term may better reflect the disciplinary label, but the term ‘social theory’ recognises the crucial part played by sociological principles in the work of other social scientists. The social theories produced within sociology are used by other social scientists, and sociologists draw on the social theories produced within these other disciplines. For this reason, it is not

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possible to draw sharp intellectual boundaries around the various social science disciplines. The conceptual schemes developed within each of them cross-cut the various specialisms and social scientists must be seen as possessing a common set of conceptual schemes, embodied in the discipline of sociology, that provide the basis for the principles and theories developed within specialist work (Scott 2010).

It is for this reason that any discussion of social theory cannot confine its attention to the work of self-identified ‘sociologists’. There must be reference to the work carried out by geographers and historians and to ideas developed within economics, political science, criminology, and numerous other specialist disciplines in so far as these contribute to social theory. Disciplinary affiliations were, of course, far less marked – and often non-existent – during the formative period of the social sciences, from the mid-nineteenth century through the first third of the twentieth century, when the key principles of sociological analysis were established. The firmer disciplinary boundaries that have since been established have rarely been so tightly drawn that theorists have been rigidly confined within a particular discipline throughout their careers, and there has been a constant interchange of theoretical ideas among disciplines. The emergence and growth of interdisciplinary studies and the spawning of new disciplinary specialisms has further ensured that the production of social theory has remained a generic feature of social science and is not confined to the Sociology Departments of the universities.

In this book I aim to draw out the forms of conceptualisation that I believe to be central to a comprehensive social theory. I uncover and outline the main concerns of sociologists and other social scientists as they have developed within disciplinary discussions and try to show how they can be seen to relate to each other as elements within a broad framework of social theory. I try to show that arguments often treated as pointing to fundamental alternatives can actually be seen as complementary to each other. I argue that the degree of complementarity in social theory is actually much greater than many have assumed. Theoretical diversity is not a sign of confusion and lack of discipline but is a reflection of the complexity of the social world and of the need to approach its understanding from a number of different, but equally valid, directions.

I take a historical approach to documenting these principles of sociological analysis. I have tried to show when and where particular ways of conceptualising the social first emerged and crystallised as means of sociological explanation, using the ideas of their originators and pioneering investigators. My aim, however, is not to repeat the comprehensive history of sociological analysis that I have provided elsewhere (Scott 2005; and see Scott 1995). Rather, I aim to establish the baseline

principles from which subsequent developments have taken place, drawing on later work in so far as it adds significantly to the earlier discussions. This means that some familiar writers who reiterate or rediscover earlier ideas are given less attention than is often the case in other discussions, especially where they merely amplify or elaborate on already established principles. My aim has been to place this work within its often unacknowledged historical lineage and context so as to bring out the extent to which sociological understanding has, or has not, been advanced. Where distinctively novel ideas have emerged, their originality is recognised in relation to the departures made from already established ideas. It is in this way that the continuity and development of sociological knowledge and ideas can be brought out and the context of theoretical differences can be better understood.

Such an approach could be criticised for its ‘presentism’, for assuming that there are fundamental and unchanging issues which all theorists, regardless of their historical context, must be addressing. This is only partially valid as a comment on my method. It is self-evidently the case that the world addressed by Durkheim, for example, is fundamentally different from that faced by Foucault, and that they must, of course, be expected to employ different concepts and arguments in order to understand and explain the varying features of their worlds. The same point would apply even more strongly to the work of Durkheim and that of Plato. To this extent, the arguments of differentially located social theorists are incommensurable and it would be foolish to expect them to be integrated into a single theory with the same theoretical object. To the extent that Foucault may, in some of his work, have been concerned with the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century of European history, we might expect some convergence of his concerns with those of Durkheim. However, that would be a trivial response to the claim of ‘presentism’.

The claim underpinning the argument of this book is rather different. It is the view that there are, indeed, some fundamental features of social life that are true universals and that theoretical ideas to explain these will have an enduring relevance. As I will show, Durkheim developed, among other things, the idea that social phenomena exhibit a ‘structure’ and that the social structure is one of the key ‘social facts’ that define the nature and purpose of sociological explanation. Foucault shared this view. Though generally regarded as a ‘post-structuralist’, he showed that social phenomena were connected in chains of interdependence such that the observable ‘archipelago’ of individuals, groups, and agencies are connected at a deeper level by relations of power. Foucault’s concept of structure – notwithstanding his eschewal of the word – is continuous with

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that of Durkheim and can be considered as an elaboration of it. Indeed, the development of structural thinking can be traced from Durkheim through Radcliffe-Brown, Parsons, Lévi-Strauss, and others who fill the sequence from Durkheim to Foucault. It is in this sense that I see the introduction and elaboration of the idea of structure as a fundamental sociological discovery and as a universal feature of social life which all these writers can be considered as having contributed to. Similar considerations apply to all the principles of sociological analysis that I discuss in this book.

I have identified eight fundamental principles as currently underpinning the core concepts required in sociological analysis and as defining a disciplinary conspectus within which a sociological division of labour can operate. These principles are culture, nature, system, space-time, structure, action, mind, and development. Chapter 2 is concerned with *culture*, with the idea that human populations can be seen as formed through processes of enculturation or socialisation into a shared world of symbols and meanings that inform their social activity. This is not an insight achieved in any recent ‘cultural turn’ but is a deeply rooted feature of sociological understanding. I trace the emergence of an idea of culture from earlier notions of ‘spirit’ and trace the ideas of social constitution and social construction as they have developed through a variety of theoretical lineages and with varying political inflections.

Chapter 3 looks at those material conditions of *nature* that comprise the human body itself and the environment in which it lives. I trace the ways in which ideas of environmental conditioning and determination have been developed into ecological models of social change that comprehend the effects of physical conditions, modes of material production, and technologies on human ways of life. The biology of the body is an adaptive response to changing environmental conditions, but it is shaped and channelled by cultural formation to produce those variations that are so apparent as features of social life. Human activity cannot be understood in the manner of evolutionary psychology and sociobiology, as an outcome of genetic differentiation alone. This argument is illustrated through considerations of gender and kinship, neighbourliness and community, race and ethnicity, and life and death. Structures of action and forms of consciousness are shown to be products both of cultural and natural processes.

Chapter 4 shows that social processes cannot be understood without the use of the principle of *system*. Systemic relations among social phenomena are generated, reproduced, and transformed by structured processes of action. While they have holistic principles of their own, social systems have never been understood as entities distinct from the activities

that sustain them. I trace the gradual refinement of systemic ideas from early organic analogies through structural-functional and living-system models, to more dynamic non-linear views of systems as dispersed fields of activity.

Chapter 5 turns to issues that have sometimes been seen as the topics of, respectively, history and geography. These are issues in *space-time*, understood as comprising fundamental categories of human understanding. Space is understood as an abstract, formal system materially expressed in the physical conditions that comprise the environments in which human populations live. Human activity is organised in such a way that social structures exist as spatial structures and human populations can be seen as social morphologies. Physical concepts of time are related to conceptions of social time and to the idea that social activities must be understood as occurring over time and can, therefore, be seen as processes of social change. I show that temporal processes have been conceptualised at a number of levels.

Chapter 6 considers the idea of social *structure*. Although this is often seen as closely linked to the idea of culture (and some have equated social structure with ‘cultural structure’) I show that structure is not a purely cultural phenomenon and that the concept highlights the ways in which the activities undertaken in human populations are constrained in ways that may reinforce socialisation but equally may run counter to it. Behaviour can rarely be seen as completely determined by the socialisation of individuals, and they should not be seen as mere ‘oversocialised’ cultural dopes. Rather, culturally formed motivations to act must be channelled by distinctively structural factors that constitute the limits and potentialities through which actions are constrained. Culturally formed normative expectations held by those with whom we interact and the relational forces inherent in human association together comprise the constraining structural features of any human society.

The principle of *action*, described in Chapter 7, highlights the fact that individuals retain a freedom of action – agency – despite the joint effects of culture and social structure. Human agents reflexively construct their own actions as pragmatic, strategic responses to their circumstances and as expressions of commitment to their values. I trace the emergence of various strands of action theory and I show how individual actions can be related to social structure. I take up the argument of Chapter 6 – that social structures can be seen to be the products of human action – and demonstrate the mutually supporting features of explanation in terms of both structure and action.

Chapter 8 is concerned with the *mind* that is formed as a socialised subject and as an integral aspect of a socialised body. I look at the ways

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in which a distinctively social understanding of psychological processes emerged and provided concepts that allow a close articulation with contemporary views of consciousness. I look at the development of ideas of imitation and identification, and at the socialisation of the unconscious, and I examine how group processes can produce cognitive consistency. Returning to issues of time and change, the chapter explores ways in which the cognitive and emotional development in individual human agents has been conceived.

Chapter 9 is concerned with social development, understood as a specific temporal process of change in social systems. I trace the ways in which evolutionary accounts of the endogenous structural development of human societies have been modified into more flexible views of open-ended development in which exogenous processes of diffusion and conflict contribute to the triggering of the social potentialities and tendencies through individual and collective action.

These eight principles of sociological analysis emerged and have developed within sociology and the other social sciences since the formative period of the nineteenth century. This is why the pioneering ideas of the formative theorists remain of fundamental importance in sociological understanding, despite the many changes that societies have undergone since their time. The theoretical ideas that they initiated provide the conceptual means through which a variety of diverse theoretical arguments have since been constructed. Taken together, the principles comprise the essential tool kit for conceptualising social phenomena. It is not a matter of choosing among the perspectives they inform in order to select the one and only basis for doing sociology. Rather, it is necessary to recognise them all to be essential, even if of variable importance, in the intellectual division of labour through which the social sciences have and can continue to develop. The aim of this book is to elucidate these principles and to show their complementarity. This complementarity may often be unrecognised, but it is real nevertheless, as I hope to have demonstrated. The principles may not yet fit together into a coherent and perfectly integrated scheme. Many areas remain for further work and full integration may be a long way off, if it can ever be achieved. Their joint use, however, is the basis on which sociology can advance and within which more detailed explanatory work can fruitfully be undertaken.