

**SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND THE PROBLEM OF
COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY, WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO MARX, PARSONS, HABERMAS AND GIDDENS**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis stresses the centrality today of synthetical sociological theories, such as those of Habermas, Giddens and Alexander, but criticises them for neglecting the problem of collective subjectivity. The failure to consider this topic stems from deep problems in the history of sociology. Emerging from the social thinking of the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment, sociology has been keen on perceiving social life in the mould of a polarisation between active individuals and passive societies or, more generally, social systems or structures. Although the dialectics between subject and object plus the notion of interaction have allowed for bridges between those two poles, a crucial idea has not been receiving enough attention. Marx - with the concept of social class - and Parsons - with the concept of collective actor - produced two important departures from the presuppositional universe of the Enlightenment. But their elaboration does not suffice and, more regrettably however, those synthetical theories have not acknowledged and worked on the problems and concepts Marx and Parsons highlighted. The concept of collective subjectivity is, therefore, introduced to resume their insights and connect them to the issues and formulations put forward in synthetical theories. A critique of the philosophy of the subject, aiming at its decentring, is moreover pursued, for Marx and Parsons still embraced some of its main tenets. The concept of collective causality holds centre stage for the definition of collective subjectivity. Alongside collective causality, interaction, dialectics, levels of (de)centring, the syllogism of the general, the particular and the individual, plus multidimensionality, furnish the categorial axis for the development of the thesis. Concerned with general theoretical questions, this study makes, however, reference to "middle range" theories, in order to develop, ground its propositions and suggest ways in which its concepts may be useful in more empirically oriented research.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the nineteenth century beginnings of sociological theory, there has been much attention paid to individuals as actors and to societies, systems and structures. This stems from a commitment to some underlying tenets of the Enlightenment, even though it is not necessarily acknowledged, and from the almost unavoidable dependence of sociology upon the universe of ideas that furnish the ideological core of modern bourgeois society. Some alternative perspectives have been suggested to these two poles of sociological theory. Marx's and Parsons' conceptualisations stand out amongst them. Nevertheless, the very important and interesting syntheses which have been developing in the last decades do not take much notice of these alternatives and hold fast to individual actors, on the one hand, and to systems or structures, as passive entities, on the other, as the two main elements in their explanatory schemes.

The objective of this thesis is to address precisely this shortcoming. The concept of **collective subjectivity** lies, therefore, at its core. It is accompanied by a specific notion of causality, namely **collective causality**, which will allow for the understanding of social systems as something else than merely passive, inert entities. It is far from my intention to underrate the role of individual, reflexive actors in social life. On the contrary, the concept of collective subjectivity will be presented herein as an attempt at proposing a view of social systems *qua* systems of action, which, however, possess their own distinctive **properties**, amongst which collective causality should be placed. This hinges on their level of centring, for the definition of which the centripetal and centrifugal forces that are at work within and on social systems are crucial.

This study is cast simultaneously as a critique of ideology, whereby the history of sociological theory will be read from a particular angle, and as a positive approach to theory building. It adopts a deconstructive strategy, although not a post-modern one, insofar as it aims at producing theoretical insights of greater degree of adequacy. Hence, it owes more to Marxism than to post-structuralism in this regard. It moves in a very general theoretical level, although I shall throughout refer to more empirical issues. Whilst a contribution at this theoretical level, I intend to contribute to the ongoing development of a critical theory able to explain and possibly influence social change in the contemporary world. This is an aspiration which it shares with several strands of that synthetical movement.

This thesis is inspired in its mode of presentation by Marx's method of exposition in *Capital*. Its development is, therefore, theoretically organised around the exposition of categories and the order of exposition constitutes part of the argument. We begin from the most superficial layers of representation of social reality in modern ideology - individual and society, or its equivalents, systems and structures - and move further, deeper into the fabric of social life. This is achieved in part through the analysis of Marx's and Parsons' concepts of collective subjectivity, but acquires more radical expression in part three, when my own conceptualisation is introduced. In part three the method of exposition is further elaborated, since we start with the basic "cell" of social life - interaction - and gain a more comprehensive view, via the discussion of social systems' properties, including their collective causality. Thus, starting with abstract notions of individual and society, I proceed to develop concepts

which allow for the establishment of a **concrete universal** which, at a very general theoretical level, provide for a more comprehensive understanding of social life. Collective subjectivities hold centre stage in this conceptualisation, incorporating and surpassing these abstract notions.

I shall therefore present in part one the main problems on which the thesis will critically focus. In chapter one, I shall discuss the character of the contemporary movement towards heterogeneous syntheses and expound the central sociological definitions of action and order as well as the key notions of causality in the discipline. The partial alternatives to that initial polarisation will then be analysed and the historical origins of such ideas will be investigated and the contraposition between "methodological individualists" and so-called "holists" will be considered. Chapters two and three will provide occasion for an examination of the two main syntheses in contemporary sociology, those of Giddens and Habermas. I shall endeavour to bring out their enormous contribution to our thinking, but also stress how much they hark back to those two traditional poles, irrespective of how much they profit from insights that represent advances with respect to a clear-cut separation between individual and society.

Part two will fasten upon the two main concepts of collective subjectivity thus far broached in sociological theory. Marx's concept of social class and Parsons' concept of collective actor will be the focus and their paramount importance will be emphasised. On the other hand, their shortcomings will also be pointed out and criticised.

Part three will consider the concept of collective subjectivity in connection with the themes of action and interaction, on the one hand, and of structure and system, on the other. The main issues raised by contemporary theorists, in particular those oriented towards synthesis, will then be brought to bear on the unfolding of the argument. Chapter six will deal with some basic notions and introduce - via interaction - concepts I shall expand on in the following chapters. Chapter seven will substantiate the concepts of collective subjectivity and collective causality, and, thereby, the central claim of the thesis. Chapter eight will focus on multidimensionality, hierarchy and their relation to collective subjectivity. Finally, in the conclusion, three goals will be pursued. First I shall undertake to establish clearly and effectively the means to link the theory hitherto carved out to empirical investigations. Next it will be applied in a more detailed manner to a specific empirical question. Finally a reiteration of concepts will close the thesis.

The concepts of collective subjectivity, collective causality and levels of centring have a great role to play in sociology, both in terms of general theory and empirical research. In the first case because its very absence in contemporary theories is in fact a step back in relation to what was achieved by Marx and Parsons. Insofar as theorists are oblivious to the problem, they cannot, however, deal with it in theoretical terms nor profit from these empirical researches that somehow focus on collectivities. They in fact can deal with them only in *ad hoc* ways, as we shall see in Giddens' and even Habermas' cases. But the absence of these concepts in more empirically oriented research is equally problematic. For sociologists who grapple with

more empirically based problems cannot avoid dealing with collective subjectivities either, as these constitute a central phenomenon in social life. For, while these sociologists deal with this problem, they constantly overlook the subtle ways in which collective subjectivities exert impact upon social life, even when they acknowledge their presence in the course of their research. A more precise and explicit conceptualisation of the problem can provide new insights, clues and questions for empirical investigation. The almost iconographic case of the relation between Protestantism and modernity - with its exclusive concentration on "material" and "formal" causalities, whereby the Protestant sects and their collective causality receive very little attention - will furnish occasion for a specific illustration of this last contention.

* * *

Numerous persons have contributed, in one way or another, to the development of this thesis. Nevertheless, I want to acknowledge those who have been especially important for its completion in intellectual terms. My supervisor, Dr. Alan Swingewood has throughout been very helpful. Prof. Nicos Mouzelis has carefully read and commented on large sections of this study. Jean-Karine Chalaby, Creso Franco, Terry Mulhal, Cláudia Rezende, Myriam Santos and Monica Herz, contributed insights, with discussions of different aspects of the social sciences, to the unfolding of the ideas presented herein. Philip Thomas carried out a final revision of the English. To some extent at least, I am afraid they are responsible for the final outcome of my

thesis. Most probably unintendedly and with me as the intended core of this network, they comprise a collective subjectivity which has been crucial to the production of this piece of work. If they cannot be blamed for its shortcomings, they are in part responsible for the final overall result. Happily enough, I could count on them.

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PART I

SYNTHESIS AND CAUSALITY

CHAPTER I

ACTIVE AND CONDITIONING CAUSALITY IN

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

I) FRAGMENTATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

The last fifteen or twenty years have witnessed a very peculiar development within sociological theory. Referring to the whole of the social sciences, Quentin Skinner coined the expression "the return of grand theory".¹ Whatever the applicability of this formula to the sociology and history of science, to anthropology and other social disciplines, it seems more appropriate to speak of a particular development of sociological theory rather than of a reawakening of dormant theoretical forces. Of course, we should not ignore the positivist hostility to general theorisings and its still pervasive influence in sociology. If this has been a dominant tendency, it has never been, however, able to brush aside truly theoretical flights, which recently gathered momentum. Inasmuch as one bears in mind that several and sometimes very divergent schools of sociology have kept their relatively independent evolution, it may be safely stated that the most ambitious theoretical attempts in the last two decades have consistently aimed at building **synthetical approaches**. The names of Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens are probably the best known within this approach, which also includes the linkage of what, in the United States, has often been treated as the **macro/ micro** dimensions, of neo-Parsonianism and of other developments in Europe.

After years of predominance of what some authors have called the "orthodox consensus", especially in Anglo-American academic life, sociology

¹Quentin Skinner, "Introduction" to Idem, ed., *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

had to face what at the time Gouldner referred to as its "impending crisis".² In opposition to functionalism, above all against its Parsonian version, a good number of alternatives vigorously sprang up in the sixties. Apart from Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, and, in a theoretically less ambitious sense, Goffman's dramaturgy, most of the ideas that achieved more visibility during this period had been developing concomitantly with functionalism. Exchange theory, symbolic interactionism and, particularly, phenomenology already had long histories. All the same, they received a new impulse with the breakdown of the massive influence of that current.³

With some exaggeration, and adopting a terminology widespread in American sociology, Jeffrey Alexander explained these theories both as an answer to problems in the flawed Parsonian theoretical synthesis, and as an inevitable and permanent disagreement on theoretical grounds, inherent within the social sciences, which leads to diversified theoretical enterprises. Against Parsons' dominant concern with normative regulation and the impact of social structures upon individuals through socialisation, these alternative theories highlighted the component of **action** in social life, with strong emphasis on its **micro** dimension. On the other hand, structuralism, conflict theory and several

²Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, London, Heinemann, 1971 (1970), particularly chap. 10.

³Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge, Polity, 1989 (1984), p. xv. See also Richard Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1976. The extent to which one can properly speak about an "orthodox consensus" during this period is, of course, debatable, unless one wishes, as Bernstein does, to oppose to it basically a hermeneutic view, which was, in fact, at least already partially incorporated by some of those authors.

strands of historical sociology worked out general explanations of social life, of **macro** and **collectivist** character.⁴ Simultaneously, a revival in Marxist theory took place. However generally attached to the so-called "macro" themes, it was quite usual to see its participants share the same field of debate of academic sociology, as the discussions of the young and the late Marx, structuralist Marxism, phenomenological Marxism and the like demonstrate. In the meantime the Frankfurt School found a renewed and wider audience.⁵

Whereas the main thrust of these not by chance strongly polemical schools was to stretch the frontiers of their own particular forms of grasping the social world, what Alexander precisely named "the new theoretical movement" has shown a different choice of goals.⁶ The several trends that superseded the influence of functionalism, he says, transformed the general debate and permeated the empirical works of middle range. Their strength stemmed from their one-sidedness, a welcome corrective to the tightness and the all-embracing character of Parsonian sociology. These one-sided strategies eventually led these schools towards a deadlock, which they had no tools to overcome. The ultimate result of this complex development was the formulation of a work programme of a very diverse nature. Heirs to different

⁴Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The New Theoretical Movement" in Neil J. Smelser, ed., *Handbook of Sociology*, Newbury Park/ Beverly Hills, Sage, 1988, pp. 84ff.

⁵A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1988 (1979), p. 235; Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1973, p. xv.

⁶J. C. Alexander, op. cit., pp. 89-93.

traditions and at first without direct communication, some sociologists have followed a similar route. This route is the one I have mentioned above, leading to heterogeneous theoretical constructions, which, in spite of that, possess a basic common feature: the attempt at synthesis. This movement has also contributed to a greater internationalisation of sociological theory, which speaks nowadays, for the first time, a truly global language, although national traditions still retain peculiarities which are likely to persist in the foreseeable future.

These synthetical developments constitute the most powerful and progressive "research programmes"⁷ in contemporary sociological theory. This does not mean that more radical and sectional efforts, such as those of Turner - in the "micro" dimension - or Fararo - from a structuralist stance - make no sense.⁸ They must be judged on their own merits, providing that we bear in mind their partiality. The same is true as for Marxism or Weberianism, insofar as they remain open to new and contradictory developments outside their domains. By and large, these synthetical programmes include more empirically oriented research and inductive practice, besides theoretical work, although the weight of this orientation varies in each strand of research as does the means whereby theory and empirical issues are articulated within them.

⁷Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Research Programmes", in I. Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979 (1970).

⁸Jonathan Turner, *A Theory of Social Interaction*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988; Thomas Fararo, *The Meaning of General Theoretical Sociology*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

It is worthwhile noticing that this "new theoretical movement" exhibits a property it shares with the other social systems discussed in this study. It constitutes a collective causality, which has its origins in the foregoing production of the social sciences and will have impact upon the research now in progress. This movement must be seen as a **collective subjectivity**, although institutionally and theoretically not centred or homogeneous at all.

Perhaps somewhat surprising is the fact that such spontaneous collective movement came of age precisely at the moment when general regimes of speech have been severely questioned⁹, in the awakening of a world-view in the centre of which the fragmentation of social identity points to the irreducibility of **difference**. Dialectics has been in the defensive and so has its core notion of **totality**.¹⁰ How is it, thus, that such a powerful dialectical movement has been at work, bringing about an impulse towards totalisation? We can suggest that this is a moment of dialectical overcoming of that intense plurality that followed the emergence of new paradigms in social analysis. This dialectical sublation is not exactly a Hegelian one, though; it should be conceived of as a particular process in the course of which our knowledge - as Gaston Bachelard underscored - is reorganised.¹¹ One does not need, however, to discard completely the idea of contradiction in social life and

⁹Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne, Rapport sur le Savoir*, Paris, Minuit, 1979.

¹⁰M. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, Berkeley/ Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984, "Epilogue".

¹¹Gaston Bachelard, *La Philosophie du Non*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1975 (1940), pp. 4ff.

theory if contradictions are concretely understood. We must, nevertheless, bear in mind that the evolving of this dialogical social science does not lead to an absolutely unified totality, but to one wherein difference and heterogeneity are preserved¹² in the form of a plurality of syntheses. Nonetheless, the notion of collective subjectivity is almost thoroughly absent in this theoretical movement.

The hypothesis I want to present in the following pages of this chapter - and, with recourse to Giddens' and Habermas' work, in the ensuing ones - is that, notwithstanding the very important efforts and achievements of the last twenty years, contemporary sociological theory has been polarised by the opposition between individual and society, regardless of whether these are conceptualised in a dichotomous or in a more dialectical manner. Classically, these have been seen as the poles of action and structure or system. This division has a very long history in Western thought and is almost explicit in some of the most relevant theories recently accomplished. The major consequence of this polarisation is, first, the disappearance of a central element of mediation between these two poles, if not directly in substantive terms, certainly in theoretical ones, with further repercussions in the whole spectrum of sociological thinking.

The notion of **causality** rests upon the same problematical ground. I want to conceive of it herein according to the notion of **efficient cause**, which harks back to Aristotle's insights, implying the triggering off of **movement**. Nonetheless, I do not accept the **external character**, in principle, of the

¹²As suggested in the general dialectical approach of Remo Bodei, "Strategie di Individuazione", *Aut-Aut*, v. 32, 1985 (93:109), pp. 108-9.

element that operates as *explananda* for that which is the *explanandum*: the "action" of one entity over itself is not necessarily tautological. This is true in general, as for the Aristotelian notion of "material" and "formal" causes (herein broadly regarded as the social conditions whereby social systems are reproduced), but also because teleological causes can be transformed into efficient ones if taken as intentional action. A Humean conception of causality, which is always conceived as external, is thereby refused. Whether the substantive causation of a concrete phenomenon has external or internal character is, therefore, a contingent question.¹³ I shall constantly refer to the topic of causality throughout this study, in terms of its analytical importance, but shall also propose an alternative to the polarised manner in which it has been framed, with the opposition between active individual subjects and passive social totalities. It is a basic contention of this study that the traditional notions of causality - which has also been conceived of in sociological theory in a dichotomous way, either as **actional-active** or as **static-conditioning** - need to be rethought and rephrased.

In order to state my problem clearly, I shall go through four stages. First, the main characteristics of these two poles will be outlined in greater detail. My second task will consist of an inquiry into the origins of this perspective. We can, then, move on and analyse three general themes. These are positions meant to overcome that polarisation, at least in its starkest form. The

¹³For Aristotle's conceptions, see Jerald Hage and Barbara F. Meeker, *Social Causality*, Boston, Uniwin, 1988, chap. 1. For a critique of the Humean perspective, see Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, London, Harvester, 1989 (1979), especially p. 42.

dialectical relation between individual and society plus the concept of **interaction** will receive attention, as will a view that introduces **collective actors** thought of after the model of the individual actor. I hope to show how and why these theoretical positions are still limited because they have not entirely broken with some very basic theoretical elements that emerged with the Enlightenment. Finally, the never ending contraposition between individualists and the so-called holists will be taken on, not so much as a goal *per se*, but as a means to push further the clarification of the idea of **collective subjectivity**.

II) ACTION AND STRUCTURE IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Talcott Parsons gave precise form, in his *The Structure of Social Action*¹⁴, to two questions that became central in the development of sociological theory. **Action** is one of these key issues, **order** its counterpart. It is important to stress that **individual** and **system**, or **structure**, are the notions whose shadows hover above these categories. To be sure, we cannot identify system and structure with **society**. Nevertheless, time and again that is what we come across in the literature. Furthermore, the other equivalents to system and structure are more often than not envisaged according to the idea of society. This means that they are basically **reified** - notwithstanding the complex dialectics several authors attach to them - and are treated as causally **static**. If

¹⁴Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, New York, The Free Press, 1966 (1937), chaps. 2-3.

we take into account that these other systems or structures were theoretically moulded precisely according to the Enlightenment's conception of society, as I intend to demonstrate, the links between these forms of understanding systems and structures become clear.

Recasting Parsons' conceptions, Alexander produced a broad statement on what he regards as the two main "presuppositional" questions to be tackled by sociological theory, which would be, once more, the **problem of action** and the **problem of order**. He stresses that action is always, at the same time, **interaction**, but it is clear that this is conceived of as a mere outcome of individuals' intervention in the world. According to him, both Marx and Parsons developed a similar conception about these issues, having Weber and Durkheim as companions in this synthetical approach. Defining those closely connected problems, he observes that "...instead of taking the individual as the unit of analysis, the question of the nature of action must take into account the fact of the social interrelationship of a plurality of actors".¹⁵ But that is not enough, since Alexander intends to establish a **hierarchy** between these two problems, whereby none is allowed to eclipse the other. Therefore, the problem of order receives priority in the **cybernetic** hierarchy of control. Individualism should be discarded as a "viable option" since it would turn the problem of order into a "residual category".¹⁶

¹⁵J. C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, v. 1, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. 68-70.

¹⁶Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 123.

This discussion is as interesting for what it explicitly reveals as for what it fails even to be aware of. In relation to the problem of action, in a manner only partially akin to Parsons, as we will have occasion to see in a later chapter, Percy Cohen stressed the concepts of **action** and **actor** that are also openly embraced by Alexander:

The theory of action consists of a number of assumptions...which prescribe a mode of analysis for explaining the action or conduct...of typical individuals in typical situations. These typical individuals are referred to as actors or social actors.¹⁷

One could barely be more definite on a statement, which is very close to Alexander's position. As will be seen in the next section, this conception of action comes to us from the Enlightenment's tradition, having Descartes, Hobbes and Kant as its paradigmatic expressions. The brief quotation from Cohen's meditation restates the problem sociologically. As for the theme of social order, it is to Parsons himself that we should look for a precise definition. But in his case as well, it is to predecessors that the interrogation leads, since he started from a consideration of how Hobbes and Locke, in the individualistic utilitarian tradition, solved the puzzle. It was in this way that Parsons established the axis of one of his initial quests: how is order achieved

¹⁷Percy Cohen, *Modern Social Theory*, London, Heinemann, 1968, p. 69.

in society?¹⁸ What he presented was the very definition of society as a passive object, made up by its active subjects, individual actors, although Parsons put forward afterwards quite a more complex notion of actor, this is the one that is usually retained from his work, in connection with and in opposition to the idea of society (or **social system**, in a broader sense), which implied its definition in terms of its actionless essence.

Alexander, in turn, does not actually tell us that the problem of order refers to society as such. But he does not address the issue either, and treats action and order as two poles in very much the same way I have set out to criticise. In a more recent work he offers a very precise definition of our problem. He draws the opposition between the autonomy, at least potential, of actors, and the external, heteronomous limits comprised by the environment wherein agents move. He observes that "...action is organized by structural constraints that are, in some sense, external to any particular actor".¹⁹ Very clearly, alongside the causality of action, we have a second one, a merely conditioning causality, brought about, we could say, by the **influence** society exercises on individual actors.

We are, thus, faced with a sharp distinction and opposition between what I have called active and conditioning causality: the first defines the unfolding of individuals' intervention in the social realm, whereby they are able to "make a difference"; the second is the expression of society's influence on this action,

¹⁸T. Parsons, *op.cit.*, pp. 90ff.

¹⁹J. C. Alexander, "Social Analysis: Presuppositions, Ideologies, Empirical Debates", in *Action and its Environments*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 12.

influence which can be conceptualised in more or less deterministic terms according to each sociologist. Moreover, **nothing** is placed between individuals and society. This is true as for the three writers on whom we are focusing. There is, in this sense, no mediation between the two poles in their definition of those very general problems, although in their work as a whole we can find more subtle perceptions and, especially in Parsons' case, departures in another direction. The notion of a collective causality, not as passive influence, but as a conceptual comprehension closer to the idea of action, is utterly missing too. One could imagine that this is a perspective that is present in these authors alone, but what I intend to show is that they share with a great many contemporary sociologists a symptomatic lack of awareness of the theme of collective subjectivity. This notion has very often been treated as a "residual category"²⁰: it has constituted for some a category that does not fit into their theoretical framework, consisting, however, in a device that must be present in order to account for unavoidable empirical questions.

If we examine the debate about the integration of the so-called "micro" and "macro" traditions in sociology, we often encounter these positions restated.

Peter Blau, who has made contributions to both macro and micro approaches, expresses the radical break between these dimensions in the sociological tradition, which he sees as irreconcilable, at least for the moment:

²⁰See, for this concept, T. Parsons, *op.cit.*, pp. 16ff.

Microsociology analyzes the underlying social processes that engender relations between persons. The focus is on social interaction and communication...Macrosociology analyses the structure of different positions in a population and their constraints on social relations.²¹

Action, in his view, pertains to individuals. He firmly rejects the term **actor** to conceptualise collectivities, lending extreme importance to **social facts**, with the meaning this expression assumed in the first phase of Durkheim's development. Blau excludes moral elements from "social facts", returning, therefore, to a, say, pre-Kantian position.

Randall Collins is another example of the reproduction of that polarisation, with a strong inclination towards methodological individualism and the study of micro situations, in spite of his commitment to "macro-sociology" and the linkage between macro and micro. He defends the idea of "micro-translation" so as to establish more solid foundations to macro concepts.²² Nevertheless, it is quite arguable whether there is any real translation in his proposal. Elsewhere he indicates that individuals are the ultimate object of sociological analysis:

²¹Peter Blau, "Contrasting Theoretical Perspectives", in J. C. Alexander *et al.*, *The Micro-Macro Link*, Berkeley/ Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1987, p. 71.

²²Randall Collins, "Micro-Translation as a Theory Building Strategy", in Karin D. Knorr-Cetina and Aaron Cicourel, eds., *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology*, Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

"Structures" are a way of talking about the patterns of what they do in groups. If we pay attention to what goes around us all the time, it is not hard to remember that "organizations", "classes" or "societies" never do anything. Any causal explanation must ultimately come down to the actions of real individuals.²³

Once again we are confronted with the dichotomy I have been criticising. Collins - not by accident having absorbed much of Weber's style of thinking, since his early writings²⁴ - embraces ideas dear to the German sociologist: he is actually very close to, if not entirely immersed in, a nominalist frame of mind. It is necessary not to disregard, however, that another strand of reasoning can be demarcated in Collins' work. That comes about when he develops the concept of "interaction ritual chains", which introduces, at least partially, a different element in his thinking. He has more recently advanced the idea of a *meso* level of theorising in between those other two and a recommendation of translation of micro concepts into macro ones, complementing the former converse strategy.²⁵

²³Idem, *Conflict Sociology*, New York, Academic Press, 1975, p. 12.

²⁴Idem, "A Comparative Approach to Political Sociology", in Reinhard Bendix, ed., *State and Society*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1968, p. 51.

²⁵Idem, "On the Micro-Foundations of Macro-Sociology", *American Journal of Sociology*, v. 86, 1981 (984:1014); and "Interaction Ritual Chain, Power and Property: The Micro-Macro Problem as an Empirically Based Problem", in J. C. Alexander *et al.*, *op. cit.*

We shall have opportunity to investigate other approaches to sociological theory, when similar shortcomings will be brought to the fore. Before that I shall explore the origins of this polarisation, from the Enlightenment world-view on, with reference also to the work of Weber and Durkheim. They reproduced this polarisation and introduced it into the heart of sociological theory.

III)SEARCHING FOR THE ORIGINS

We can actually spot the pristine characterisation of the individual in the very beginnings of Christian representations, with its formalisation in the hands of Augustine. But it was only "out" of this world, in a direct and mystic contact with God, that a human being could achieve individualisation at this stage.²⁶ Ever since then the problem of free will has held centre stage. During the European Middle Ages, in a reciprocal influence with the individualisation that the development of markets was bringing about²⁷, the idea of the individual took deeper roots in social thinking, although not all formulations assumed it as such a paramount category. Basically, two strands were of major importance during this period. On the one hand, Dun the Scott and Wilhelm Occam drew the main features of a nominalistic epistemology and of an individualistic social theory, even in terms of political power and ecclesiastical

²⁶Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l'Individualism. Une Perspective Anthropologique sur l'Ideologie Moderne*, Paris, Seuil, 1983.

²⁷Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1964 (1857/8).

function; Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, put more emphasis on the roles of the state - a political body which would mediate between the individual and the community - and the church - a mystical body which would mediate with God.²⁸

The Renaissance, for the first time, made the individual the axiological centre of society, introducing a distinction between (individual) morals and (social) ethics.²⁹ A number of concurrent and subsequent movements brought the domain of the individual to earth, which attained expression in the varied forms of subjectivism introduced by Descartes, Pascal, the Reformation and by others.³⁰ It was with the Enlightenment, though, that the bourgeois individual completely took over the definition of social life.

This process began with the development, under the Absolutist State, of an economic sphere independent of the political realm, having as a counterpart the familiar niche of the "middle class". Therein, under the patriarchal command of the male bourgeois, these newly individualised beings could fulfil their humanity and enlighten themselves. Piecemeal, this generated a **literary public sphere**, in which the debate of free opinions developed. A second step implied the enhancing and differentiation of the literary sphere into a **political public sphere**. This meant that power should be snatched away from the

²⁸Richard Morse, *El Espejo de Próspero*, Mexico, Siglo XXI, 1982, chap. 1.

²⁹Agnes Heller, *Renaissance Man*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978 (1967).

³⁰See Benjamin Nelson, "Conscience and the Making of Early Modern Cultures. The Protestant Ethic beyond Max Weber", *Social Research*, 1969, v. 36 (5:21).

Monarch and that the foundations of a system of representation should be laid down. In those enlarged spheres, the debate of rational individuals could develop, their interests be represented and experience a universal sublation.³¹ The revolutionary upheavals that heralded the modern era in Europe and the United States had different expressions and intensity according to the distinct regions in which they occurred. All the same, the middle class identity became everywhere a bifurcated one: private and economic, with expression in its bourgeois face, plus public and political, with expression in the concept of citizen.³²

In the first case, utilitarian individuals had to pursue their interests and self-satisfaction within a reified economic world, dominated by the fetishism of the commodity, which seemed beyond their control and was utterly external.³³ How to explain, then, the permanence of a political and social order was the main question Parsons pointed to as the central dilemma of utilitarian thought, as we saw above. Hobbes introduced a second element in his picture of society, the Leviathan, to which members of society should give up their sovereignty so as to achieve order and prevent the "war of everyone against everyone". But it was Locke who really decided the future of utilitarian individualism when he proposed the fanciful notion of a spontaneous harmony

³¹Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1989 (1962).

³²K. Marx, *Zur Juden Frage* (1844), in K. Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, B. 1, Berlin, Dietz, 1956, pp. 354-5 and 363ff.

³³K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. I, MEGA II-5, Berlin, Dietz, 1987 (1867), p. 102.

of interests which, rather than depending on the threat of violence by the state, would bring men together in the political cooperation of the social contract so that they could enjoy the fruition of the products of nature.³⁴ For Hobbes and Locke, despite their differences, political society comes about through the deeds of **active** individuals and constitutes a **passive** thing, a quality it shares with the external facticity of the market. The same may be said of the broader concept of society, as a network of institutions and processes, which had a strong original formulation in the writings of Montesquieu, Millar and Ferguson.³⁵

It should be noted that often in these formulations the notion of "emergent properties" of social phenomena was present.³⁶ The most pervasive and central persuasion of this period certainly was, however, an atomistic view of human nature and society. This perspective had strong parallels with the contemporary classical mechanics of Isaac Newton and its notion of "simple location", according to which one particle could be pinpointed in space without reference to anything else.³⁷ Hobbes, once more, was the first to draw the consequences of this world-view, turning what was already prefigured in

³⁴T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, pp. 90ff. He did not notice, though, that at least in the material dimension this order appeared to the individual actor as external and **given**.

³⁵See Alan Swingewood, *A Short History of Sociological Thought*, London, Macmillan, 1988 (1984), pp. 17ff.

³⁶Steven Seidman, *Liberalism and the Origins of European Social Theory*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, pp. 23-34.

³⁷Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1933 (1926), pp. 61ff.

Descartes' individual monad of knowledge into an individual (knowledgeable) actor.³⁸ If individuals have ever since been grasped in interaction, they were conceived of as pre-constituted actors that subsequently come across each other in society and interacted. Ernest Cassirer expresses this perspective with great clarity:

The eighteenth century doctrine of the state and society only rarely accepted without reservations the content of Hobbes's teaching, but the form in which Hobbes embodied this content exerted a powerful and lasting influence...In this field too the analytic and synthetic method is victorious. Sociology is modelled on physics and analytic psychology [...] Thus at first Hobbes proceeds by analytically isolating the elements of his problem...The problem of political theory consists in explaining how a connection can arise from this absolute isolation - a connection that not only joins individuals loosely together but which eventually welds them into a single whole.³⁹

Drawing upon the idea of human reason, our reflexive capacity, and the imperative necessity and possibility of individual freedom, the Enlightenment bequeathed also an ever lasting concept of human nature to modern sociology.

³⁸T. Parsons, "Social Interaction" (1968), in *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*, New York, Free Press, 1977, pp. 155-6 and 164-5.

³⁹Ernest Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1951 (1931), pp. 20 and 255-6.

Kant, who detected in the individualistic strand of Rousseau's philosophy an emphasis on "man's capacity for moral self-direction", translated this reflexivity and freedom into the concept of **autonomy**, our independence from God, society or nature, based on unconditional and imperative categories. This was coupled with an abstract and reified concept of totality, evenly shared by the human community.⁴⁰ Another version of the drives that propel human action was developed by cruder strands of utilitarian and proto-positivist thinkers (whose views were chastised by Kant as a mistaken apology of the **heteronomic** aspects of human behaviour). For them, our organic impulses constituted the **leitmotif** of action.⁴¹ In both cases, nonetheless, action was defined in individual terms, against a backdrop of conditioning imperatives, interests and natural forces, which were seen as influential but not reflexive.

Moreover, in the Scottish Enlightenment, with Smith and Ferguson, but also in England, for instance with Locke, an idea that has recently been granted great favour was already put forward. The unintended consequences of intentional action were regarded not only as means whereby the social fabric is webbed, but as the secret that explains the developmental logic of human society.⁴²

⁴⁰Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Enlightenment & Despair*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987 (1976), p. 34; Lucien Goldmann, *Etude sur la Pensée Dialectique et son Histoire: la Communauté Humaine chez Kant*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1948.

⁴¹See T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, pp. 60ff.

⁴²See A. Swingewood, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-8.

But even within the Enlightenment, the narrow scope of this standpoint was felt. Rousseau is important in this regard, in his non-individualistic strand, with his concept of "collective will", which was to have a strong influence on the normative problematic advanced by Kant.⁴³ But with Leibniz and his notion of the individual as a monad, complete - as a unity, not as the mere sum of its parts - and isolated, the seed of a new formulation was laid, not in itself, but via its appropriation by the Romantics. The reaction to the French Revolution - with Burke, de Bonald and de Maistre - rejected the concept of the individualised rational actor presupposed by both the Gerondins and the Jacobins, underscoring the irrational and traditional aspects of social life, alongside their stress on the organic nature of society and the importance of the bonds that link individuals within it.⁴⁴ Led by the genius of Herder, the Germans, with their romantic historicism, took up Leibniz's concept of the individual and turned it into a category that could be applied not only to human individuals, but also to historically individualised societies, which had their own personality.⁴⁵

This is probably the first modern formulation (with the exception of the Kantian assimilation of freedom to the universal categorical imperative) to state society as enabling individuals to be what they are as well as constraining them within certain limits. There was no individuality outside the meaningful

⁴³E. Cassirer, *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963.

⁴⁴A. Swingewood, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-5.

⁴⁵E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, pp. 29ff.

tissue of culture and human and natural relations that constituted the deepest traits of social life; there was no order either without the hierarchy and relations on which society depended.⁴⁶ Despite this contraposition of an organic and hierarchical totality to that individualistic framework, there appears to be, and this is the main point, scarce contradiction between the two opposing views. Also in the Romantics' portrayal, society was depicted as a passive totality, extremely influential in the coming into being and remaining of its individual members, but, as such, motionless. This was so also because they dealt with isolated totalities, which had little in common with other societies. Action was confined to their individual members and in this sense its definition was strikingly similar to that of the Enlightenment, even though society was given the upper hand in the Romantics' formulation. If we bear in mind that conservative thinking was born out of a dialogue, however fierce, with its predecessor, and left behind what should be properly called a "traditionalist" approach to society, it is not too hard to understand the coincidence of these points of view.⁴⁷

The circumstances in which departures from this perspective apparently obtained really entailed a restatement of the kinship between those two intellectual movements. If society could be taken as an actor, it was after the individual's model that it was visualised, since its concept as a totality came precisely out of that idea. Already in Herder, but afterwards possibly coupled

⁴⁶Karl Mannheim, *Conservatism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986 (1925). See also S. Seidman, *op.cit.*, pp. 44ff.

⁴⁷K. Mannheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-6.

with Vico's conception of history as a product of human praxis, this is an idea that achieved widespread currency in German philosophical idealism, from Kant to Hegel, above all with respect to the broader history of humankind.⁴⁸ It introduced what Martin Jay has called a "longitudinal" concept of totality. Its sociological impact was, however, reduced; the role played by what that author has named a "latitudinal" concept of totality was, in fact, more crucial. Hegel was also central for its definition, although a cardinal aspect of his contribution has been consistently overlooked - one which will be examined when we tackle Marx's theory of collective subjectivity. The concept of "longitudinal" totality referred to the unfolding of history and the concept of "latitudinal" totality covered the whole of relations encompassed by a certain social order. Moreover, an expressivist model of the **self** had been instituted in the years of the German "Sturm und Drang", according to which a socially grounded subject was seen as striving to come to its full development. It was eventually regarded as valid for both individuals and society.⁴⁹

The nineteenth century was witness to a companionship between the sociological science that then arose and another branch of the natural sciences - biology (although Herder had already been aware of its importance to social thinking, provided its framework was reinterpreted). In both sciences, thus, the notion of **organism** became progressively central, with a translation of the Enlightenment's notion of progress into evolutionary lines. In sociology,

⁴⁸See M. Jay, *op. cit.*, chap. 1, and R. Bodei, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁴⁹Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 3-50.

Comte and Spencer (the latter still committed, however, to utilitarian individualism) became exponents of this development, which partially challenged the very foundations of Hobbes' paradigm and its atomistic thrust.⁵⁰ The interplay of influences between the two sciences should not occupy us, suffice it to say that it just grew henceforth. For this, the figure of the physiologist Lawrence J. Henderson was decisive in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁵¹ The basic features of the polarisation between individual and society were not, as one could expect, questioned by this new reference.

One should bear in mind that the idea of society, central for all these undertakings, assumed different connotations in each formulation. For Herder, for instance, it meant basically an expressive totality of non-political character - concretely, tribes and nations, in their multiplicity and incommensurability.⁵² It is true as well that Marxism, from its early beginnings, broke free from rigid national boundaries, stressing the international character of the capitalist economy and of contemporary class struggles, despite the lack of actual

⁵⁰For an overview, see John C. Greene, "Biology and Social Theory in the Nineteenth Century: Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer", in *Science, Ideology, and World View*, Berkeley/ Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1981.

⁵¹See Garland E. Allen, *Life Sciences in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978, chap. 4, and Bernard Barber, "Introduction" to Lawrence J. Henderson, *On the Social System*, London, The Chicago University Press, 1970. One wonders also why the development of the theory of relativity and of quantum theory, which dealt a serious blow to the Newtonian-Hobbesian paradigm, by means of their relational crux, did not have greater impact upon sociological thinking.

⁵²Isaiah Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment", in *Vico and Herder*, London, Hogarth, 1976.

analysis of the international feasibility of socialism.⁵³ Nonetheless, the legacy of both Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment to twentieth century sociology implied the definition of society in the tight limits of the modern nation-state, whether its main concern was with the political dimension, as in Hobbes and Locke, or with culture more generally, as in Herder. The result of this misuse of a category debatable in such clear-cut way even as for the historical coordinates it stemmed from was to distort the understanding of social formations, such as Ancient China and India, in a mould that could hardly be appropriate⁵⁴, let alone the passivity embodied in the category of society *per se*.

How did the "founding fathers" of sociology deal with this heritage? Postponing Marx's very central alternative to a later stage, let us briefly examine Weber's and Durkheim's answers.

Max Weber has been characterised as a paradigmatic case of methodological individualism, since he emphasised the necessity of "understanding" social life through the **meaning** individuals attach to their action - although he repeatedly warned that this must be accomplished in the **relationship** between actors and introduced **types** of social action as units of analysis.⁵⁵ One could positively raise objections with respect to the

⁵³Vendula Kubalkova and Albert Cruickshank, *Marxism and International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 27ff.

⁵⁴Wolfram Eberhard, "Problems of Historical Sociology", in R. Bendix, *op. cit.*, and Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, v. I, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, chap. I.

⁵⁵Max Weber, "Über einige Kategorie des verstehenden Soziologie" (1913) and "Soziologische Grundbegriffe" (1921), in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur*

consistency with which Weber applied his principles, both methodologically and substantively. In the first case, because he put so much emphasis on collective movements in the making of history, his general methodological position may look dubious. He would probably claim, however, the possibility and necessity of the reduction of those movements to the meaning they possess for their participants. If sociology cannot ignore collective ideal constructions, such as the idea of the state, it should refuse any notion of "active (*handelnde*) collective personality".⁵⁶ Moreover, social action is often oriented towards the representations of a given form of domination, a legitimate order.⁵⁷ Hence, notwithstanding those considerations, he was firmly committed to a conception of the social in which we find active individuals and conditioning structures, especially in terms of frozen meaning.

The trajectory of Emile Durkheim's attempts to come to terms with these issues was more complex. He started with a tough position, emphasising and criticising Spencer's utilitarian individualism,⁵⁸ and defined **social facts** as external, constraining and irreducible to the individual mind. Sociology, therefore, was irreducible to, and should be separated from, psychology. Social

Wissenschaftslehre (ed. by Johannes Winckelmann), Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1951, pp. 429, 528 and 536; and pp. 553ff - respectively.

⁵⁶Idem, "Soziologie Grundbegriffe", in *op. cit.*, p. 539.

⁵⁷Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 539. Because of his acute historical flair he did not, however, identify these passive entities directly with the modern nation-state and the society contained within its boundaries.

⁵⁸Emile Durkheim, *De la Division du Travail Social*, Paris, Felix Alcan, 1893, pp. 219ff.

facts ought to be seen as **things**.⁵⁹ He gradually softened his position, approaching in the end of his oeuvre a view that stressed society (in its religious expressions) as a moral reality, interpenetrated with the individuals' mind. He fell short, however, of realising the importance of this insight for the understanding of social orders as interactive systems. Durkheim certainly did not deny the active character of progressively individualised individuals and the reality of modern **moral individualism**; but, up to his later work, he was keen on stressing the **action of society upon itself**⁶⁰, despite the fact that its passivity in external terms was not questioned. Thereby he intimated a concept of **totality** which hovers above, and is something more than, the interaction of social elements - in his case, individuals.⁶¹ In a sense, nonetheless, some progress was achieved, since social facts were regarded in this last phase as emerging from social relations rather than as rough external determinations.

This is the set core of presuppositions that contemporary sociological theory received from the Enlightenment, the Romantics and some of its first exponents (to whom I shall return in chapter seven). Sociology derived its concepts and generalisations from this heritage. In addition, Ferdinand de

⁵⁹Idem, *Règles de la Méthode Sociologique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1977 (1895), chaps. 1-2.

⁶⁰Idem, *Formes Elementaires de la Vie Religieuse*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1968 (1912), pp. 23-4, 603-8 and 617-21.

⁶¹Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 27. Which, however, receives different shapes historically, from the small primitive group to the international system of the contemporary world. And, in **normative** terms (as de Tocqueville before him), Durkheim did notice the importance of intermediate bodies for social life. See the "Preface a la Seconde Edition" (1902) of *De la Division du Travail Social*, wherein he discusses the "corporations" as mediators between the individuals and the state.

Saussure introduced a separation between *langue* and *parole*, producing an approach which, whatever its validity in linguistics at that time, once it was absorbed by the social sciences in general and sociology in particular basically recast the main thrust of the notion of society as a passive entity, except for its influence on its members. He borrowed from Durkheim the idea of external and constraining social facts, which were regarded now as a **structure** (although he used more often the word system to refer to them).⁶² Some other alternatives were, nevertheless opened, different from this set core, but which share some problems with it. Let us now investigate their potential and limitations.

IV) SURPASSING THE POLARISATION: THREE SETS OF CONCEPTS

I want now to turn my attention to particularly important developments, which begin to dissolve that polarisation, bringing closer those two terms that were formerly completely separate and/or maintained a one-way relationship with one another. Dialectics, interaction and an idea of collectivities as actors are the main alternatives which have been crafted, although to a limited extent, to go beyond the polarity between individuals and society in sociological theory. Let us see how this assumes expression in twentieth century writers.

Pierre Bourdieu, under the confessed influence of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach", worked out an interesting dialectical approach to come to grips

⁶²Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Paris, Payot, 1962 (1915), pp. 25ff and 104.

with the polarisation between individual and structures. The last category appears in his "theory of practice" in place of the more common concept of system in the Anglo-Saxon tradition,. This happens because his polemic is directed mainly against structuralist accounts of social life, which were exceedingly important in France during the sixties and the seventies. On the other hand, he sharply criticises Sartrean phenomenology and neo-utilitarian currents. This means that he aims at a critique of both "objectivist" and "subjectivist" approaches: the former would steadily substitute the theoretical model built to understand reality for the reality it investigates; but he refuses the latter's view as well, for it embraces too broad an idea of individual autonomy and rationality.⁶³

Bourdieu intends to establish a dialectical relation between structure and action, a challenge he chooses to meet by introducing the key concept of **habitus**. This consists in a "system of durable and transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures", which constitute principles of a generative and organising character, imprinting their influence on "practices and perceptions". The habitus is, furthermore, responsible for the coming about of social regularities. It forms a "system of cognitive and motivating structures", granting the actors with anticipations about the possibilities of unfolding directions of events, its background furnished by past occurrences. Those anticipations, originated in past experiences, are characterised by Bourdieu as "practical hypotheses".

⁶³Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, Paris, Les Edition de Minuit, 1980, chaps. 1-2. See also his *Esquisse d'une Theorie de la Pratique*, Geneve, Droz, 1972.

Nonetheless, in certain limits the habitus assures a "conditioned and conditioning freedom" to the actor; it is, therefore, an "art of inventing", accounting for some bounded creativity.⁶⁴

It is not necessary to go into detail about his oeuvre and the concepts anchored on these general theoretical reflections. It is enough to highlight the definition of an ongoing process of mutual transformation between actors and social structures that is the basic outcome of his reworking of some Marxian dialectical conceptions and, in a highly critical manner and inspired by Wittgenstein's stress on the practical aspect of language-games, of some ideas disseminated by Parsons (above all the concept of need-dispositions). Moreover, it is interesting to draw attention to the fact that, if he recognises the validity of collective action, Bourdieu tends to fall back upon individualistic notions of subjectivity: alongside concepts such as "culture", "structures" and "modes of production", he aims at disposing of the concept of "social classes" as real actors. According to him, sliding from the noun (*le substantif*) to the substance, the attribution of action to these reified abstractions entails an unwarranted "personification of collectivities".⁶⁵ There is some reasonable concern in his refusal to treat collectivities as persons; this should not mean, however, that they have no subjectivity and are not "subjects responsible for historical actions". I shall leave the question there for the

⁶⁴Idem, *Le Sens Pratique*, pp. 87ff.

⁶⁵Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4. See also his "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups", *Theory and Society*, v. 14, 1985 (723:794).

moment, just stressing that it will become the main focus in the development of this study.

Similarly, we find David Lockwood's distinction between "system" and "social" integration⁶⁶, which, in spite of being considered by him as "wholly artificial", is retained in the course of his assessment. The latter fastens upon "the orderly or conflictual relationships between the actors", the former upon "the orderly or conflictual relationships between the parts", of a social system. We should bear clearly in mind that when he speaks about "actors" he is, in fact, referring to **collective** agents. His argument has not had much influence in theoretical developments until recently, but in terms of a very different reading - which does not pay enough heed to "collective actors". These constitute a central part of his reasoning, again under the acknowledged influence of Marx.

Providing that we do not forget the importance of Lockwood's sensitive remarks, we must once more recognise some real limitations to them. He presents an excessively loose, but at the same time reductionist, concept of collective actor and collective subjectivity. The former engulfs the latter, although we do not encounter a discussion of its meaning. Intertwined with this, there is still a more general problem. This is the opposition between system and social integration, "parts" and "actors", which is shaped having our already well known categories as a backdrop - conditioning and active causality: as for actors, action and volition underpin the analysis, whereas, in

⁶⁶David Lockwood, "Social Integration and System Integration", in George Z. Zollschan and W. Hirst, eds., *Explorations in Social Change*, London, Routledge, 1964.

regard to parts, inert structures are to be grappled with. Lockwood has arrived at an earlier insight of a "theory of structuration" (which includes collective actors), stopping short, however, of overcoming that polarisation, which he ends up reproducing in a more specific theoretical level.

Knorr-Cetina presses home an important set of considerations regarding the linkage of micro and macro-sociological approaches, now connected to the notion of interaction. We must acknowledge that some key traditional ideas hitherto stressed do not lose their sway, but it is true too that a new question is introduced. Drawing attention to the "upsurge" of theories and methodologies concerned with "micro-processes of social life", such as symbolic interactionism, cognitive sociology, ethnomethodology, ethogenics, etc., she speaks about a powerful challenge to macro-sociology. A twofold onslaught was launched: the move from an idea of normative order to a **cognitive** one and the rejection of both individualism and collectivism. The main target of those first onslaughts was basically, for historical reasons, Parsonian theory. Nevertheless, the fact that only "individuals are responsible, purposive human actors" does not inhibit her from refusing also the reduction of sociology to an individualistic methodology:

Micro sociologies...do not turn to individuals, but to **interactions in social situations** as the relevant methodological units.⁶⁷

⁶⁷K. D. Knorr-Cetina, "Introduction: the Micro-Sociological Challenge of Macro-Sociology: towards a Reconstruction of Social Theory and Methodology", in K. D. Knorr-Cetina and A. Cicourel, eds., *op.cit.*, p. 8.

Her background is clear, stretching over to Simmel, Mead, Blumer, Goffman, Garfinkel and others. If she gives continuity to a legacy that attaches great importance to the concept of **interaction**, she reproduces, as they do, the same ideas that we found in the beginnings of the Enlightenment: the usual configuration of the notion of interaction does not suffice to put the debate in new terms, for it still implies actors as individuals and interactions as passive systems or structures. Moreover, as I tried to bring out with the historical sketch of the origins of this theoretical polarisation, from the very beginning individuals have been observed in interaction, even though they used to be seen as prior to it. What, then, is the particular contribution of the concept of interaction, so much stressed recently, and what are its limitations, if it is kept within the determinations of the polarisation, dialecticised or not, on which we have been focusing?

Norbert Willey's definition of levels helps make these points clear. He underscores the differences between the diverse layers that constitute social life. First, he opposes the individual to the social, which is further split into the interactive and the "supra-interactive" levels. Finally, he divides the latter in two other ones, the social structure and the cultural levels. It is necessary to notice that these levels are connected by a "continual flow" from one to the other. According to him, however, it is exactly the level of interaction which has not received its due amount of analysis. Therefore, it comes to be "...one of the thorniest problems in social theory, largely because so many theorists have omitted or misconceived this level". Thus far, he remains on a very general plane. He introduces in the discussion, then, another interesting

suggestion, irrespective of how inappropriate its inclusion in his line of reasoning is, since it belongs in a more empirical domain. He says that **organisations** should be thought of as "...intervening between interaction and the larger social structure".⁶⁸ Willey advances the notion of a more varied compass of social formations, with their own characteristics and connections, bringing together some divergent strands of sociological theory. His systematisation is an extremely arguable one and his understanding of the role played in some contemporary theorists by the concept of interaction is less than accurate. However, it allows us to trace two questions.

Apparently, at least, the notion of interaction breaks through the polarisation of individuals and society (social structure and culture, it seems, in Willey's terminology). It would offer the idea of **mediation** a concrete place. That is certainly true, but only in part. What needs to be asked is whether this implies that interaction is conceived of as possessing the quality of **agency**. In both Willey's work and in general in recent attempts at bridging the gap between "micro" and "macro", this is not the case.

That should not be surprising, since this is how the concept of interaction has received shape. This is a salient feature of Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and of Erving Goffman's dramaturgy. The central tenet of the former's propositions is that the activities through which everyday life is produced are identical with the procedures their producers use to make them accountable. It means that these are "reflexive" activities, "observable-and-

⁶⁸Norbert Willey, "The Micro-Macro Problem in Social Theory", *Sociological Theory*, v. 6, 1988 (254:261), pp. 258-9, especially.

reportable" practices for the individual "members" of the interaction.⁶⁹ As Goffman's most famous book title indicates, what he was interested in was the "presentation of self" in its interactive conduct in several settings in daily life. His selves are also knowledgeable actors, capable of manipulating social norms according to their individual interests as well as the stages wherein their lives are spent.⁷⁰ Both treated action as individual action, without much concern with what happens beyond the static world of interactions, which constitute **micro-societies** and share the passive characteristics of the larger societies wherein they are carried on. Goffman and Garfinkel dwelt upon the study of institutions such as hospitals and the like, leaving aside the impact of

⁶⁹Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Cambridge, Polity, 1984 (1967), p. 1.

⁷⁰Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, 1956. See also J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith, *American Sociology and Pragmatism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 26 - wherein they defend the idea that George Mead, himself a "social realist", has not actually exerted much influence on the subsequent development of the Chicago school, predominantly nominalist (or, as I would rather say, individualist), contrary to what is usually assumed. This particular point would not matter so much for my discussion if the notion of interaction did receive passive clutches in any case, as supposed by Lewis and Smith. As we shall see, this is not, however, the standpoint espoused by Mead. Historically, it is to Georg Simmel that the other source of the notion of interaction should be debited, in its innovations and limitations, although Marx had already worked out a more powerful version of this theoretical leap forward, despite not having received the corresponding attention by professional sociologists, an issue to be tackled later on. In Simmel's case, in any event, the concept of "sociation", with its primary formal appearance in the dyadic relation between two actors, introduced the notion of interaction with its active individual and passive systemic or societal causality. See Georg Simmel, "How is Society Possible?" (1908) in *On Individuality and Social Forms* (ed. by Donald L. Levine), Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1971. The same shortcomings are found in Alfred Schutz's phenomenological work. They are clear, for example, in his "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Experience and Thought Objects", in *Collected Papers*, v. I, Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962.

their subjectivity, but upon their own members, what is, moreover, even questionable in the case of ethnomethodology (since Garfinkel is strongly inclined towards a sort of sociological solipsism).

This has been the main thrust of micro-sociology and also the means whereby the linkage between the so-called micro and macro traditions have been sought. Lest it pass unnoticed, it is important to remember that Alexander's and Parsons' definition of action emphasised on its interactive aspect, which of course points to a direct relation with the problem of order. All the same, this depiction of these two sets of questions did not deliver much from the standpoint of the concept of interaction as an independent conceptual level. We must, therefore, be aware of the peculiarity and novelty of a notion of interaction in the course of which actors constitute themselves. This will be focused on in connection to Marx's, Mead's and Habermas' contributions, and more specifically in chapter six. It is curious that in these developments so much of their original source of inspiration was lost. I mention once more to Parsons' work, against whom some of those undertakings were planned. Only in an extremely partial way did they address some very central issues in that author, inasmuch as he represents one of the most important advances regarding the problem of collective subjectivity in the field of sociology, as will be seen in chapter five.

We can finally analyse an interesting treatment of the notion of collective actor and the problem of causality linked to it.

Rom Harré takes up the problem we are dealing with in an interesting and somewhat less usual direction.⁷¹ He intends to draw a clear distinction between two kinds of collectivities. The first comprises "taxonomic groups". Their reality would be fictitious, for this would be merely a conceptual categorisation, with existence only in the mind of the observer, derived from the attribution of "similar beliefs, dispositions or aspirations" to a group. In contrast, there is another kind of collectivity, the **structured** one, which would involve roles and role-holders. Harré wants to imply, with the idea of structure, the twin notion of **emergent properties** (which he introduces via allusions to the natural sciences). These collectivities can sometimes appear as "supra-individuals". They should be continuous in time, occupying a precise and continuous space - although he recognises the non-universality of this characteristic - and, what is distinctively important for our discussion, they would have **causal powers or efficacy** - again regardless of the lack of refinement of this concept, as he believes. With this he wants to discard most of the concepts of "macro-sociology", including the concept of social class. They would be merely **expressive and rhetorical** devices, hardly allowing for empirical definitions and demonstrations. In fact, it seems that those taxonomic groups would be no more than small scale "institutions and the like", which must be arrived at inductively. Possible bridges bringing macro and micro together seem to be written off.

⁷¹Rom Harré, "Philosophical Aspects of the Macro-Micro Problem", in K. D. Cetina and A. Cicourel, eds., *op. cit.*

We find, thus, a line of argument that aims at tackling collective action, and, more than that, **collective action *qua* a systems' action**. Nevertheless, the prototype according to which Harré's collective actor is built consists, unfortunately, of that of the individual, and in its most traditional form. It possesses what I have called **active causality**. Furthermore, this would even distinguish collective actors from amorphous entities, aggregates of individuals with common features ascribed by the social scientist alone. In the case of those active collectivities, Harré assumes, by means of the idea of emergent properties, a realist position; as for the other case, deprived in his view of this quality, he sustains a nominalist perspective. The notion of **conditioning causality**, as I have defined it, is visible in his article when he suggests the influence of collectivities on their individual members.

This author treads an unusual path, making use of logical premises to state his ideas. Notwithstanding his intelligent coupling of structure and causality, I shall reject his identification of collectivities with individuals as well as his arbitrary separation of collective actors and collectivistic fictions. This means precisely to refuse a clear-cut line between the ideas of **active** and **conditioning** causality. The main aim of this study will exactly consist of devising of some ideas to think the problem anew. The notion of social systems as collectivities with **varying levels of subjectivity** will be central to my argument. In order to advance towards this goal, however, I will have to criticise most of the theories of collective subjectivity already developed in sociological theory. They tend to accept the same standpoint we have just seen Harré support. So as to assimilate their otherwise fruitful propositions, we will

need to sort out this equivocal model from the insights that are intertwined with it.

V)INDIVIDUALISM AND HOLISM: IDEOLOGY AND THE LAYERS OF SOCIAL REALITY

It is time to comment on what is probably the most exclusive of all the polarisations in the social sciences, the one that opposes **methodological individualists** and the so-called **holists**. I do not intend to discuss it at length, for it seems to me, as it should be evident to the reader at this stage, that this is, in fact, an imprecise watershed. Of course, "methodological individualists" are usually outspoken about their perspective. This does not, however, warrant the assumption that the writers they are in pains to criticise are "holists", a classification that most of them would not acquiesce to and which sounds to me, at any rate, as fallacious.⁷² Durkheim, for instance, has often been considered as a case of "holism"; but, as I have commented, he was progressively more concerned with the interplay between individual and society, despite the greatest emphasis he was inclined to place on the latter,

⁷²Furthermore, one should be careful with a direct identification of the epistemological opposition between nominalism and realism, on the one hand, and individualism and holism, on the other. This is what is done by Werner Stark, *The Fundamental Forms of Social Thought*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, pp. 2-3, and J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-4. These are logically independent positions, not to be conflated, regardless of how often they have been historically associated. One might, thus, logically (though not exactly with good inspiration) indicate beings in the social realm whose depiction under the same concept would be just a shorthand definition without assuming the reduction of these beings to their individual members, as would be required in individualistic accounts.

and from the start acknowledged the importance of modern moral individualism.

It would be hard to find examples to fit the "holistic" model. On the other hand, it goes without saying that individualists do reproduce the action framework I have brought out: they usually are its main advocates. Moreover, they often leave the social environment of action unexamined or try to explain it away with recourse to the comfortable device of unintended consequences of intentional behaviour.⁷³ The core of their argument, as we see in Jon Elster's individualistic Marxism, implies a **reduction** of the whole social world to the actions of its individual atoms (notwithstanding the recognised impossibility of substantiating this postulate).⁷⁴ There are, of course, authors who are inclined to situate themselves within a holistic framework, as Mead or, more recently and explicitly, Nicos Mouzelis⁷⁵ do, since they refuse the idea of society as the mere sum of its parts, striving to grasp it in its wholeness. But this classification does not do justice to their theoretical developments, since they are concerned precisely with the **interplay** between actors and the interactional setting or society, as we shall see in subsequent analyses.

⁷³See Barry Hindess, *Choice, Rationality, and Social Theory*, London, Uniwin, 1988, pp. 106ff.

⁷⁴Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 8 and 359ff.

⁷⁵George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, & Society*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1962 (1927/30), p. 7; Nicos Mouzelis, *Post-Marxist Alternatives*, London, Macmillan, 1990, p. 38.

I do not wish to deny that certain writers adopt visions of society which put stress on the whole, sometimes playing it off against particular groups and individuals. Hegel, to a considerable extent, may be included amongst such writers, although he is far from joining in pantheistic ambitions or presenting an undifferentiated view of totality.⁷⁶ Mead is not completely innocent in this regard either. Their work, even so, is characterised by much more complex perceptions of reality, bringing out the multiple instances of social life and history, individual longings and action, plus the struggle between groups, notwithstanding Hegel's ultimate reduction of this manifold reality to the manifestation of the Absolute Spirit.⁷⁷

And it is true that so-called Western Marxists have on occasion embraced aspects of that sort of reductionism and relied upon a philosophy of history which, already for Marx, secured the optimal and necessary outcome of the overcoming of capitalism and the ensuing communist society. Yet once more I do not think that their characterisation as holists is appropriate, especially when writers such as Sartre, so deeply committed to individualism, are included under this gloss.⁷⁸ In the course of the very polemic between Popper and Adorno we can spot the latter recurrently stressing **totality** and

⁷⁶See C. Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 81ff.

⁷⁷See Georg Lukács, *Über die Besondeheit als Kategorie der Ästhetik*, in *Werke*, B. 10, Berlin/ Neuwide, Luchterhand, 1969, p. 574.

⁷⁸Martin Jay's otherwise interesting book, *Marxism and Totality* (passim), falls pray to this standard categorisation. As for the French philosopher, the mere recall of his "progressive" and "regressive" method suffices to eschew any idea of holism, even in his late oeuvre, let alone the early one. See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Question de Méthode", in *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960.

individuality as two **moments** of the reproduction of society.⁷⁹ Others, however, such as Louis Althusser, are closer to Hegel. If we examine his formulation about the relation between agency and structure, we will in fact find the total dominance of the latter: it is the structural ideological apparatuses of the state which, in their functioning to reproduce social relations, shout, as policemen, to concrete individuals - "hey, you there" - and turn them into **subjects**.⁸⁰ For all that, it is not an undifferentiated totality what comes out of his writings; in a manner akin to Parsons - a totalist or even a "totalitarian" writer? - he has offered, despite the remaining of an unspecified economic determination in the last instance, a formulation which, splitting society in different and decentred levels, depicts social totalities as heterogeneous and fractured. Moreover, the notion of **practices** provides a means of preventing both an anthropomorphic reading of society and its reification⁸¹ - although its conceptual potential, I would claim, is made effective only in connection with the notion of collective subjectivity.

Having said that, I do think that it is important to **radicalise** the differentiation of the concept of totality: not only to address questions posited by contemporary identity formations, but also in order to carve out a concept of more general application as to social systems, which seem never to have

⁷⁹For that quarrel see Theodor W. Adorno, ed., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, London, Heinemann, 1977 (1969).

⁸⁰Louis Althusser, "Idéologie et Appareils Idéologiques d'Etat", in *Positions*, Paris, Editions Sociales, 1976, p. 113.

⁸¹Idem, *Pour Marx*, Paris, Maspero, 1965, pp. 85ff, 206 and 163-98. For a discussion on structuralism and totality, see Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971 (1968), pp. 97ff.

been so compact and coherent at any stage of human history, although it looks as if with capitalism that fragmentation of totality has achieved further dimensions. Giddens' and Habermas' syntheses, as well as a host of other contemporary theories, are fraught with suggestions in this direction and I shall draw upon them so as to attain that radicalisation. A mediating concept, that of **particularity**, will be introduced later on in order to help the conceptualisation of collective subjectivities. As for claims to absolute knowledge or directly falsifiable statements, I shall confine myself for the moment to observing that, in the aftermath of discussions enacted under the influence of Wittgenstein and Kuhn, on one the hand, and hermeneutics, on the other, neither Hegel nor Popper fare very well. A train of reasoning that touches upon certain issues related to this topic will be suggested in the introduction to the concluding part of this study.

Moreover, the content of the explanation for everything in social life receives in the hands of "methodological individualists" a formulation which, at least programmatically, demands a reduction to which I have called active causality, on what Elster himself is very straightforward. In his case, active causality is dressed as intentional causality, although he accepts two subsidiary notions of causality, the subintentional - internal to the actor - and the suprainentional - external to the actor - as an outcome of social contradictions.⁸² Nevertheless, as their proclamation is too broad to support,

⁸²J. Elster, *op. cit.*, pp. 27ff, and *Logic and Society*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 1978, especially p. 158. Weber attributed the meaning of action to motives, which hold the basis for the explanation, playing with the German word *Grund* (at the same time "reason" and "ground"). Cf. M. Weber, "Soziologische Grundbegriffe", in *op. cit.*, p. 536. Other forms of

methodological individualists frequently back off from their radical postulation and accept explanations that introduce elements that are **not** reducible to individual action and causality.⁸³ Thereby we witness a capitulation to the notion of a social, merely conditioning causality.

It is not that individualistic views of social reality are utterly mistaken. Even more compelling, to an extent, are the views of those who concentrate on totalities as passive social entities. They grasp some important features of social life, but methodological individualists above all remain at a superficial level, without obtaining access to deeper layers of social relations. As we have seen, individual and society have been two strongholds of bourgeois ideology. Sheer individualism belongs with other elements of this ideological core, complemented by more totalist approaches, which, in fact, tend to accept the former's vision of action in its exclusively individualistic form. They have their moment of truth; we must not allow, however, that the overwhelming obfuscation of these ideological appearances make us blind to other aspects of reality.

The situation is analogous to that uncovered by Karl Marx in his study of the capitalist mode of production. Is the first category grappled with by *Capital* a mere gloss, to be discarded after a more penetrating analysis? By no means. Together with the assumptions tied to the idea of the universal exchange of

individualistic explanation, such as crude behaviourist ones, would certainly play a similar role, despite the specific content of the efficient cause in each case.

⁸³See Steven Lukes, "Methodological Individualism Reconsidered", in *Essays in Social Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1977.

equivalents in the market, the commodity is perhaps the central element of bourgeois economic ideologies. In spite of that, it constitutes a **moment** of the categorial exposition developed by Marx and, within its limits, possesses a dimension of truth, becoming ideological only inasmuch as we do not move further, through and past its practical and theoretical ideological function, onto other concepts - above all that of surplus-value. It is, hence, necessary to unveil the aspects of social relations hidden inside the universe of daily perceptions and ideological presuppositions inherent to the ongoing process of capitalist production, without, however, brushing aside the veracity contained in those more superficial layers.⁸⁴

I do not want to eschew as a whole the ideas of the "methodological individualists", whose contribution to certain aspects of a theory of collective subjectivity will be taken up in chapters seven and eight. Rather, through the contradictions of one of their exponents, I shall introduce a crucial problem, concerning the relation between a social systems' properties and causality.

⁸⁴See K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, passim (especially B. I), and the 1857 "Introduction" to the *Grundrisse der Politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin, Dietz, 1953. Bhaskar's conceptions are very interesting as he points to the "stratified" character of reality. Whereas he utilises the term **structure** to address these stratified dimensions of reality, to which science gains access step by step, I prefer the word **layer**. I do so in order to avoid confusion with the concept of structure, which, basic for the social sciences, shall be examined later on. For his general conceptions, see R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, Leeds, Leeds Books, 1975, especially chap. 1. He has, moreover, neared the idea herein presented, of individualism and "holism" as partial approaches to social life, although he is unaware of the problematic of collective subjectivity. See Idem, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, pp. 19-20 and 30ff.

VI)STRUCTURE, MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL PROPERTIES

As mentioned above, Karl Popper is a supporter of the idea that the whole of social life should be explained with respect to individual action, a position he defends in his better known writings on the social sciences.⁸⁵ Subsequently, however, he smuggled a different approach to this question into his discussions on epistemology. This happened when he proposed the distinction between "worlds" or "universes". The first of them alludes to "physical objects" or "states"; the second to "states of consciousness" or "mental states", or "behavioural dispositions to act"; against "belief philosophers" (such as Descartes, Locke or Kant), who are interested in our subjective beliefs and the bases of their origins, he delineated a third sphere, that of "objective contents of thought", close to a Platonic theory of ideas or, more faintly, to Hegel's objective spirit.⁸⁶ The contents of this "third world" comprise theoretical systems, problems and problem situations, critical arguments - and the material amassed in journals, books and libraries. Popper is adamant that we must not relegate these contents to the second world, for the third has a "more or less" "independent existence".

Somewhere else in the same book he expanded the third world and included in it all the products of human opinion and knowledge - the "most

⁸⁵Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, v. 1 and 2, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966 (1945); and *The Poverty of Historicism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, especially pp. 17-9 and 76-83.

⁸⁶Idem, *Objective Knowledge. An Evolutionary Approach*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1972, pp. 106-7.

important field" of historical studies, constituting the "central problem of humanities", i.e. religion, philosophy and science, going still further to embrace **language** in its complete dimension.⁸⁷ Strangely enough, without any allusion to the transcendental principle of methodological individualism, Popper referred back to a passage in an older publication, where we glimpse at the pristine formulation of this now developed thesis and, by the same token, are caught by the suspicion that material structures are, in his own view, themselves **not** reducible to individual action either.⁸⁸ What we are offered is a theory of **objective structures** that have **emergent properties**, a product of the "human animal", just like a spider's web.⁸⁹ Their "production", their creation, as the outcome of individual action, would not really matter, although more generally he recognised the dialectics between the second and the third world (as well as their imprint on the first):

The third world is largely **autonomous**, even though we constantly act upon it and are acted upon by it: it is autonomous in spite of the fact that it is our product and that it has a strong feed back effect upon us; that is to say, upon us *qua* inmates of the second and even of the first world.⁹⁰

⁸⁷Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 159, 185 and 300.

⁸⁸Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 107, and for the original proposition, Idem, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, v. 2, p. 108.

⁸⁹Idem, *Objective Knowledge*, pp. 112-4 and 297ff.

⁹⁰Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 112.

Not only the imprecision of his terminology - "more or less" and "human animal" are simply the outstandingly elusive expressions to be found in these passages; also an implicit recognition of the implausibility of methodological individualism is brought out by these reflections. Yet what is more important to our case is that Popper refuses to acknowledge the fact that social **interaction** is a central element in the history of science, with the constitution of scientific communities (although, curiously enough, his criteria of truth is based on intersubjectivity⁹¹). He remains prisoner of the polarisation this chapter identified and, furthermore, does give in to the "holistic" adversaries of his own making, for he acknowledges social phenomena that must be understood in their own reality. His ultimate point of view is still an individualistic one, for, behind the idea of "emergency", lurks the supposition that those phenomena come about as a result of individual "mental states";⁹² notwithstanding, the product of these states is visualised in its **wholeness**. Popper could not accept, on the other hand, an approximation of his third world to an active process, wherein social interactions within a community define a **collective subjectivity** whose "ideal" as well as "material" products undergo a permanent transformation in terms that do not allow for their **reification** in an "objective" independent universe. That is the reason why he is so unsure of Hegel's standpoint in relation to his theory, indicating their

⁹¹Idem, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1959 (1934), p. 47.

⁹²Idem, *Objective Knowledge*, p. 297.

similarities, but refusing, more discretely, what he regards as a conflation of the second and the third world by that philosopher.⁹³

He has, however, already lost sight of his methodological contention, one of the central banners that made him a well known spokesman against Hegelians, totalitarians and holists in general. We are presented, therefore, in the end, merely with something that in most of the formulations thus far examined was already apparent: the denial of causality to collective subjectivities.

Hitherto we have concentrated basically on four categories: individual and society plus the dialectics between them and the notion of interaction; we have also scrutinised a concept of collective actor that falls short of suggesting a real breakthrough with respect to that narrow frame of conditioning and active causalities that permeate those four categories; and I have hinted at the alternative category of collective subjectivity and its correlative notion of collective causality, which we have seen throughout being denied as commanding the status of a **property** of social systems. Popper's inconsistencies have furnished the ultimate basis to criticise this ideological universe and made clear a crucial aspect of social reality that lies hidden underneath its powerful spell. We are prepared now to tackle the two in my opinion most important versions of theoretical synthesis in contemporary sociology, which miss as well a concept of collective subjectivity, the revision

⁹³This occurs despite his remark on our interaction with the third world: Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 112; and, for his account of Hegel's position, p. 154, note 2.

and reconstruction of which will engage us in the second and third parts of this study.

CHAPTER II

INDIVIDUALS, STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

IN GIDDENS' STRUCTURATION THEORY

I) THE SYNTHETICAL CHARACTER OF THE THEORY OF STRUCTURATION

One of the central attempts in contemporary sociology in the direction of a synthesis of the manifold trends that mushroomed in the sixties and thereafter is Anthony Giddens' "theory of structuration". His work today shows great complexity, including substantive research in important areas and very general theoretical formulations. Concomitantly, he has been an assiduous visitor to the history of the social sciences, especially that of sociology. From the beginning one of his main concerns has been with what he regards as the need to surpass the themes, problems and concepts bequeathed to contemporary thinking by the social scientists of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, although the incorporation of their contribution has also been a goal. This striving towards renewal was already manifest in his study of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, and has been henceforth repeatedly reiterated.¹ After a consistent discussion on the origins of capitalism and its subsequent development, as well as that of "state socialism", he changed the focus of his interests, turning to a highly general level of theorising - thereby becoming one

¹A. Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp. vii and 276; and, more recently, "A Reply to my Critics" in David Held and John B. Thompson, eds., *Social Theory of Modern Societies: Anthony Giddens and his Critics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

of major the exponents of a redirection of English sociology during the last twenty years.²

Cohen commented on the fact that Giddens shares with Marx and Parsons a manner of building concepts that constitutes what the latter named "analytical realism". The concept of "duality of structure" is in this regard crucial for this theoretical synthesis, being moreover thought out as a bridge that allows its general propositions to connect with empirical research. Cohen even claims an ontological character for this body of concepts - whereby we have an indication of their level of generality, but also of some problems to be tackled later on; particularly because Giddens' work would be an "ontology of potentials", referring to social actors considered *qua* individuals.³ In part as a consequence of this perspective, a gap opens up between Giddens' own theory and his more empirically oriented research, although it should be added that an overelaboration of his conceptualisations and the effort to sometimes cover too many issues are also responsible for these problems.

²Perry Anderson, "A Culture in Contraflow-I", *New Left Review*, n. 180, 1990 (41:78), p. 52. In that work on class structures the first sparks of the theory of structuration can be seen, although without major implications. What led to the development of the theory was the shift in a "methodological direction", as we are told in A. Giddens, "Structuration Theory and Sociological Analysis", in Jon Clark, Celia Modgil and Sohan Modgil, eds., *Anthony Giddens. Consensus and Controversy*, Basingstoke, The Falmer Press, 1990, p. 298. For the original question, see Idem, *The Class Structure of Advanced Societies*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1973.

³Ira J. Cohen, *Structuration Theory. Anthony Giddens and the Constitution of Society*, London, Macmillan, 1989, pp. 11, 17-8 and 233ff; and "Structuration Theory and Social Praxis", in A. Giddens and J. H. Turner, eds., *Social Theory Today*, Cambridge, Polity, 1987. For the theoretical/ empirical role of the "duality of structure", see especially A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, pp. 339-40.

Pushing forward his project of theoretical synthesis, Giddens has been keen to debate with disparate trends in the social sciences. Since his 1971 book, the dialogue broached with the founding fathers of sociology has been time and again resumed, together with the appraisal of other subjects and writers, such as Habermas. If these discussions spread over varied domains, they have their axis in a critical revision of what he sees as two opposed fields in social theory: on the one hand, the "interpretive sociologies", of Schutz and Garfinkel, plus hermeneutics, with Gadamer; on the other, Parsons' and Merton's functionalism, as well as structuralism, with Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, plus its post-structuralist successor, represented by Foucault and Derrida. In an intermediary position we must place his valorisation of Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas and Goffman's sociology. Giddens's stake is clear: he wants to bring together the contributions of these currents, inasmuch as a great many of their insights are deemed essential. He intends, however, to overcome what he understands as subjectivism in the first and as objectivism in the second, both approaches being, therefore, one-sided.

To be sure, many of the contemporary representatives of these schools reject this characterisation of their enterprise. In any case, more important for our discussion is how Giddens accomplishes his own synthesis and the concepts that are instrumental for this purpose. It is exactly for the powerful and erudite manner in which his contribution is cast that it is the more astonishing to notice that he resolutely partakes in the traditional model of social life brought out in the foregoing chapter. It is true that dialectics - between individuals, on the one hand, and structures and social systems, on the

other - and the notion of interaction are central in his theoretical framework. Active and conditioning causalities, however, still hold centre stage, demonstrating their perennial grasp of the social sciences' conceptual universe.

II) ACTION, SYSTEM AND STRUCTURE

A whole series of neologisms and metaphors were forged by Giddens to develop his project. The concept of "duality of structure" features as the cornerstone of his theory. At first sight its definition does not imply much novelty. In some measure, this is an impression that is confirmed after a more detailed examination, since that concept reproduces some basic features of older formulations. This must not cloud the fact that it allows for a rapprochement of strands of thought which, having developed in more recent years, paid little respect to any already laid down undisputed solution - even if the solution was worthwhile bearing in mind, as Giddens realises. As he expresses his point of view:

By the **duality of structure** I mean that social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very **medium** of this constitution.⁴

⁴A. Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1988 (1976), p. 121.

The Marx of the "Theses on Feuerbach" is indubitably the direct inspiration of this statement.⁵ It is also evident that contemporary authors would hardly deny the interplay between the two elements implied in that passage. Giddens draws his own conclusions from these premises, though. Let us investigate the concepts and propositions that derive from this basic formulation.

In the process of establishing his personal standpoint on the role and characteristics of subjectivity in social life, Giddens dwells upon the ideas that stem from the schools mentioned above, developing an array of analytical distinctions. He embraces the contributions of phenomenology and ethnomethodology, of the Wittgensteinian philosophies of language and of the Anglo-Saxon philosophies of action. The hermeneutic currents are present with their emphasis on the notion of *Verstehen* - introduced in the theory of structuration not only as a methodological device, but also as a paramount ingredient of the constitution of social life in its widest range. Echos of Schutz and Marx are audible, alongside an underlying, notwithstanding hidden polemic against Parsons, when he advances his concept of action:

I shall define action or agency as **the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world**. The notion of agency connects directly with the concept of *Praxis*, and when speaking of regularized

⁵Idem, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 53.

types of acts I shall talk of human **practices**, as an ongoing series of "practical activities".⁶

With this distinction, our author underscores the role of reflexivity in social action. Thereby he distinguishes "action" and "agency" from "acts", which are the "elements" or "segments" of action, identified as such by the actor only through a "reflexive process of attention". We should not forget that the thrust of this conception of social action lies in the idea that, in their daily life (actually the reference for the carving out of these categories), actors successfully carry out a permanent "monitoring" of their activity. As furnishing the rationale for this monitoring, Giddens points out "intentions" or "purposes" that have as consequence acts with which the actor intends to "make a difference" in the world. "Project" constitutes a definition of "purpose" in relation to long term developments. "Reasons", in turn, may be defined as "grounded principles of action", a central feature of agents' monitoring of their intervention in social interactions. Interests are no more than "outcomes" or "events" that facilitate the fulfilment of agents' "wants". All these concepts basically refer to processes of which the actor is aware. The notion of motivation, however, implies drives which - as we have known since Freud - may not be accessible at the level of consciousness to the actors themselves.

The importance of these categories derives especially from the general conclusion they deliver: the production and reproduction of social life are

⁶Idem, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, p. 75. The references to the theme of subjectivity are all to be found in chaps. 2-3 of this publication.

brought about by the activities of human beings in terms of "purposes" and "projects". These are processes that are to be understood as the outcome of the **conscious action of individual actors** - notwithstanding the fact that the notion of consciousness, as will be seen shortly, is rather nuanced according to Giddens, and that, besides, actors command always limited knowledge of the conditions and consequences of their action. Giddens is entirely committed to a conception of social life in which the "constitution of society" depends on the ability of individuals and, therefore, he characterises the making of social life as a "skilled achievement". Once more the hypotheses of phenomenology and ethnomethodology come to the fore. By means of "mutual knowledge", the "competent" members of a society apply interpretive schemes through which interactions receive shape.⁷ Introducing a notion whose consequences will be explored below, Giddens observes, in addition, that all reproduction is at the same time production, drawing from this the conclusion that the "seed of change is there in every act".

The notion of consciousness is outlined in Giddens' work in a very original form: he seeks out a "stratified model" to make it compatible with the contradictory approaches of psychology and psychoanalysis. Alongside a "discursive consciousness", whereby actors are able to express verbally the grounds of their conduct, he posits a "practical consciousness", which makes possible their movement in day-to-day life, monitoring their action by means of acts and in situations (phenomenologically) taken for granted. The more

⁷One could certainly demand a more detailed account of the relation between this knowledgeability and the concept of ideology as posited in Idem, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 167ff.

traditional concept of "unconscious" closes the enumeration of the layers of his model. As we have seen above, motivations are regarded by Giddens as often unconscious. But what is more interesting and polemical in his account of this theoretical issue, at which he arrives with his notion of "practical consciousness", is the statement that a large part of the actions carried out by individuals in social life are rooted in nothing else but routine. Thence one ought not to suppose underlying motivational processes which would impel actors in every action. The challenge to Parsons conception of "need-dispositions" is evident in this discussion.⁸

The concept of power brings us to the conclusion of our investigation of Giddens' view of action. He actually understands that they are inevitably, "logically" linked. The idea of action cannot dispense with the twin notion of "means", in the sense of the production of outcomes. "Power" would, thus, be the "transformative capacity of human action", the capacity of the agent to mobilise resources to constitute those means. Nonetheless, it is this idea of "transformative capacity" that Giddens retains to refer to the general concept of power, reserving the latter expression for a more restricted and traditional use, thereby returning to Weber (and Hobbes), the notion of power in a strict sense is connected to that of **domination**, the capacity to secure outcomes that are dependent upon the "action of others". In passing, it should be noted that his ultimate definition of "power" is inappropriately "realistic", since the idea

⁸This problematic is developed at length in Idem, *The Constitution of Society*, pp. 43ff. Based on an existential horizon acquired since childhood, the concept of "ontological security" sustains this anti-normative platform. I regard, however, with scepticism his attempt to substitute his own concepts for those of I, it and I-ideal that are cardinal to Freud's psychoanalytical theory.

of domination entails an unsurpassable inequality between individual actors (and collective subjectivities). There is no **logical** connection between this idea and the concept of power as influence or control, in a broader mould, even though, of course, relations of power may assume the form of subordination (by force or not) of subjects by subjects - as they often do. Societies seem to be inherently hierarchical; the form and content of this hierarchical disposition is, however, to be historically grasped.⁹

At this stage, it is clear enough that Giddens opts for a totally traditional concept of social action. He does not have much in common with behaviourists and writers that are wont to reduce individual action to a derived effect of social structures. The opposite is true. His is a very classical conception of active causality, though, in what it has that is theoretically interesting, but also in its shortcomings, inherited from the Enlightenment and its subsequent followers. It will be evident below how much he owes to a Kantian or Romantic conception of totality as well. He explicitly states that causality does not presuppose laws of "invariant connection", but rather: "a)the **necessary connection** between cause and effect, and b)the idea of causal efficacy". He rejects an opposition between freedom and necessity, asserting the notion of "agent causality" - the causality obtained by the actor's reflexive conduct - as

⁹To be sure, the extent to which structures should be regarded as enabling or constraining, according to what we shall see shortly, demands the consideration of differentials of power positioning. See N. Mouzelis, *Back to Sociological Theory. Bridging the Micro-Macro Gap*, London, Macmillan, 1991, chap. 2.

a principle of explanation, proposing that we completely shun "determinism".¹⁰

This standpoint could be directly related to what Anderson interprets as a commitment to "libertarian socialism" or to his version of "utopian realism"¹¹, which requires an awareness of the questions that need to be addressed by a critical and agile social science in the context of contemporary society.¹² Therein the issues of individual autonomisation and self-fulfilment must be given due attention. We must ask, however, whether this is the best solution to fill in the theoretical voids of a contemporary critical approach to society, regardless of how many interesting insights his sensibility is likely to bring to a renewed critical theory, especially in terms of the problematic of individuality and its "disembodiedness" in "late modernity".

It would be a mistake to classify Giddens neatly as an individualist, as the ensuing analysis of this chapter will make clear. "Methodological individualists" are usually prone to reduce the whole of social life to individual action. Giddens is far from assuming this narrow positioning, but he is

¹⁰A. Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, pp. 84-5.

¹¹P. Anderson, op. cit., p. 54. For his definition of "utopian realism", see A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity/ Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 154ff.

¹²For the impact of the North-American culture upon his perception of the limitations of the "agenda of the European left" (and for biographical information in general), see Christopher G. A. Bryant and David Jary, "Introduction: Coming to Terms with Anthony Giddens", in Idem, eds., *Giddens' Theory of Structuration: a Critical Appreciation*, London, Routledge, 1991. His more recent publications dive into this problematic: A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity, Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991, and *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Cambridge, Polity, 1992.

definitely a neighbour of some of their tenets.¹³ The problem is that he opts for a compromise with an individualistic perspective when he confines the idea of activity to individuals and locks collectivities into passivity, perhaps influenced by his commitment to individual autonomy and freedom. Curiously enough, probably evincing a widespread consonance of opinions as for the definition of action in contemporary social sciences, this action branch of Giddens' duality of structure has not been the target of too many quarrels, even though Habermas has accused him of holding an anthropomorphic conception of society, which would be excessively open to transformation under the *Praxis* of individuals.¹⁴ Nowhere, however, does the alternative depicted go beyond a different way of putting those well known active and conditioning sorts of causality.

When conceptualising the other dimension of the "duality of structure" Giddens makes a U-turn in order to bring into his synthesis the contributions of structuralism and functionalism, making sharp and free use of Marx once

¹³As can be seen in A. Giddens, "Commentary on the Debate", *Theory and Society*, v. 11, 1982 (527:539) - when, in an intervention in the polemic between Cohen, Roemer, Offe, Elster and others, he reveals much more sympathy for those individualist writers, despite his rejection of both functionalism and methodological individualism. In any case, his immersion in an individualistic perspective as for the classically posed "problem of order" was, as one might expect, considered excessive by J. C. Alexander, "The New Theoretical Movement", in N. J. Smelser, ed., *Handbook of Sociology*, p. 90.

¹⁴J. Habermas, "A Reply to my Critics", in David Held and John B. Thompson, eds., *Habermas. Critical Debates*, London, Macmillan, 1982, p. 268. Giddens was also criticised for an oscillation between an attempt at superseding the dichotomy subject/ object and the perception of daily conduct as "activity" or "doing", whereby the pole of the subject would regain preeminence. See Fred D. Dallmayr, "The Theory of Structuration: a Critique", in A. Giddens, *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1982, p. 22.

more. Even before launching the *New Rules of Sociological Method*, his first extensive exposition of the structuration theses, Giddens had already underlined his dissatisfaction with the "subjectivism" and "relativism" that had taken over a large territory within the social sciences in the aftermath of the crisis of functionalism. Despite its limitations, that current had brought forward the crucial problems of "social organization", the importance of which he emphasises.¹⁵

It may well be maintained as a caveat that Giddens' principal influence comes from linguistics, with a number of grave problems occurring as a consequence.¹⁶ If it is more than feasible to state the negative character of some aspects of these concerns, it would be wrong to overlook the insights produced by them and the thrashing out of some of their more problematic shortcomings by the author himself. Furthermore, however incompletely, other tendencies concur to give a definite place to the concepts derived from linguistics in his comprehensive theorisation.

Giddens' first step in this connection was to fasten upon the differences of meaning the term **structure** receives in those two traditions. In structural-functionalism, he argues, the concept of structure appears on a par with that of **function**: whereas the first is above all descriptive, the second is responsible

¹⁵A. Giddens, "Functionalism: après la Lutte", in *Studies in Social and Political Theory*, London, Hutchinson, 1977, p. 96. His general account of structuralism and post-structuralism appears in his *Central Problems in Social Theory*, chap. I.

¹⁶Margaret S. Archer, "Morphogenesis versus Structuration: on Combining Structure and Action", *British Journal of Sociology*, v. 33, 1982 (455:483), p. 472.

for the main explicative operations. In turn, for structuralism, the notion of structure is intertwined with the idea of "rules of transformation", with the difference between function and structure substituted by "code" and "message". Functionalists treated structures as patterns of interaction, stretching over time - although Giddens proposes there was a supposed fluctuation of usage between "structure" and "system"; Saussure, on the other hand, used to employ the term "system" rather than "structure", a tendency reversed in the work of other structuralists. Giddens is, in however, eager to set their meaning clearly apart:

"... 'structure' refers to 'structural property', or more exactly, to 'structuring property', structuring properties providing the 'biding' of time and space in social systems. I argue that these properties can be understood as rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Structures exist paradigmatically, as an absent set of differences, temporally 'present' only in their instantiation, in the constituting moments of social systems".¹⁷

According to this definition, a social system is a "structured totality", existent in space and in time. Structures, on the other hand, exist only abstractly and are characterised by the **absence of subject**. In fact, attributing a "realist" character to structures and depicting social systems as merely the

¹⁷A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 64.

patterning of social relations between individual actors, he intends to invert the usual configuration of these concepts. Thereby, it should be stressed, system becomes a concept that conveys something of a skeleton-like quality and has, turned into a nominalistic entity, its properties denied. I shall take stock of his concept of structure in a critical way shortly and shall refuse, later on, this watering down of the concept of system in the course of a discussion geared towards an alternative definition.

Giddens' scheme was enriched by the introduction of two complementary distinctions, which do not change those basic traits, nonetheless. The first brings out the plural character of structures, whilst the second draws the lines between "structural principles" (modes of articulation and differentiation of the institutions whereof a society is constituted), the already focused "structures", and the "elements or axes of structuration" (which lead to the examination of the structural properties of the institutional practices that lie at their bases). There is a hierarchy between them in terms of abstraction, in the order they were above listed. This differentiation and hierarchisation have a methodological, but not a substantive basis. It must be added that, out of time and space, structures are regarded by Giddens as enjoying a virtual existence only, in "memory tracks" and organisational complexes - wherein the **storage capacity** of social systems, progressively enhanced by writing and other forms of notation, is of paramount relevance. Furthermore, the notions of "rules" and "resources" serve an outstanding purpose: they are intended to open the concept of structure to the actors' action. If a structure works as a constraint, it is at the same time **enabling**, creating the possibilities for the freedom of the

actor (as in Kantianism or Romanticism). Structures are, in addition, open to permanent transformation.¹⁸

Notwithstanding the great effort condensed in these formulations, they not only leave some questions unanswered but, as would be inevitable, show weaknesses that raise polemical responses. It may be asserted, for instance, as Thompson does, that Giddens does not possess a concept of structure that could do justice to the specific features of "social structures".¹⁹ Despite its only partial truthfulness, this consists in a worthwhile consideration, since it shows the narrow and unsatisfactory content of Giddens' concept of structure and of those related to it - "rules", which has not received a clear definition, and "resources". Particularly important is to ask about both the limitations of his conceptualisations and what happens to the notion of structure if we sail beyond the domain of language.

The most obvious thing arises directly from the influence structuralism exerted on this construction. An overreliance upon linguistics is clearly burdensome. At this stage, we must inquire into the status of the "resources" pointed to by Giddens - those he characterises as "allocative", i.e. material aspects of the environment, means of material production and reproduction,

¹⁸Idem, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, London, Macmillan, 1981, pp. 35 and 54-5; *The Constitution of Society*, pp. 16-24.

¹⁹J. B. Thompson, "The Theory of Structuration" and - for an answer - A. Giddens, "A Reply to my Critics", in D. Held and J. B. Thompson, eds., *Social Theories of Modern Society: Anthony Giddens and his Critiques*, pp. 62-70 and pp. 256-7, respectively. Although this critic brings up several central problems, Giddens' dissection of the concept of coercion (prominent in Thompson's critique) - pushed through in *The Constitution of Society* (pp. 172ff) - in its Durkheimian dimensions of *contraint* and *coercion*, clears a great deal of the most common confusions surrounding this problematic.

and finished goods, as well as those he names "authoritative", comprising the organisation of time and space, the organisation of "life-chances", the production and reproduction of the human body. These resources would be elements of social totalities, not the possession of individuals, constituting a "structured system of domination" (with, once more, a far-fetched "realism" seeping through).²⁰

Giddens seems to realise that an individualistic response to this set of social properties will not do. How could one treat material elements - including the human body - as paradigmatic structures, which have existence out of space and time? His conceptual universe is, therefore, under considerable strain. Even if we introduce the idea of "instantiation" of these structures by individual action in the constitutive moments of interactive processes - what would apparently, though not really, make sense in the case of beliefs and knowledge, for example when their "presentification" obtains - the conceptualisation remains inconsistent, unless we cling to an extreme and untenable individualistic perspective. I shall carry out below a discussion which suggests that Giddens tends to insert the "structures" into the actors' consciousness, in its practical, non-discursive layer. If this would be appropriate to deal with "paradigmatic" entities (such as language), other aspects of social life that might be grasped by means of the concept of structure - as economic and political systems - do not allow for a simple "instantiation" in interactive processes.

²⁰A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 73-7; *The Constitution of Society*, p. 39 (note 2).

In a more basic level, nevertheless, we must tackle the coherent character of these structures as presupposed by Giddens. Contrary to his view, it should be said that social structures do not belong in the tidy space of grammatics.²¹ In this sense, Giddens cannot help sharing the company of those "objectivists" (whom he strives to overcome) attacked by Bourdieu, a writer who directs his salvos against the typical division between *langue* and *parole* so dear to structuralists. The reification brought about by these constructions is produced either through functionalist operations or by substituting a presumed "reality of the model" for the more modest and correct "model of reality"²², a mistake Giddens has committed in theoretical terms.

Moreover, in criticising Lévi-Strauss and assuming a reified concept of structure²³, Giddens is pressed into an extremely rigid view: he seems to think that the different structures of which he speaks are, in fact, **evenly distributed** amongst all the individuals that make up a social system. In the end, it seems that these individuals could hardly be individualised, since they would share exactly the same sort of perspectives, values, and capacities. This concept of structure turns out to be, thus, a highly deterministic one. In order

²¹M. S. Archer, op. cit., p. 460. She does not realise, however, that languages as such are not as coherent as linguists and grammarians often imagine they are.

²²P. Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, pp. 55-67.

²³A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 62-3. His concept of structure is, to an extent, more rigid than Lévi-Strauss's, who refers only to the systematic features of reality - upon which our model should be built, and correspond directly to - and recognises accidental, non-systematic aspects of social relations. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, "La Notion de Structure en Ethnologie", *Anthropologie Structurale*, Paris, Plon, 1974 (1958).

to move away from its evenness and determinism and craft an alternative concept of structure as open to change and individualisation, another approach is necessary. Otherwise we are dangerously close to an idea of "collective mind" that exists and changes synchronically in all individuals, and which could scarcely be said to be enabling. It should be added, in any case, that, although without much specification, this conceptualisation allows him to avoid a characterisation of internalised norms as commanding individual behaviour - an issue I shall return to in chapter six. Moreover, if he is correct in pointing out the individualistic limitations of Schutz's phenomenology, this should not lead to the opposite shortcoming, namely the theoretical disappearance of individuals in the face of structures. Actually, it is still to be shown that we can have more than just a "fragmentary and imperfect knowledge of the other"²⁴, as Schutz intuited.

We saw at the beginning of our analysis of Giddens' work that he incorporates one of the main advances of the social sciences in attempting to break through a stiff polarisation between individual and society, resorting to Marx's dialectics between subject and object. The other spearhead of this development, the notion of interaction, is also present in his theory. In fact, he asserts that the proper locus for the study of social reproduction lies within the confines of the "immediate process of the constitution of interaction", whence "everyday life" should be considered a "phenomenon of the totality".²⁵ The duality of structure would afford procedures which make interactive processes

²⁴A. Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, pp. 17-8 and 24 ff.

²⁵Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 122.

understandable. The problem is that it is never clear whether Giddens devises an ontological or a methodological status for this duality. We will have occasion to ask about the depth of the notion of interaction in this theory, which, despite his wishes and undertakings, remains questionable.

He upholds, on the other hand, a methodological "bracketing" that would pave the way for the study of the two poles of that duality (no longer, he claims, a dualism), each with its own characteristics.²⁶ His methodological distinction points to two operations: an "institutional analysis", to penetrate the passive universe of the structures, and an "analysis of the strategic conduct". A new category is introduced to bridge those two procedures, the "modalities of structuration". They receive the label of "central dimensions of the duality of structure in the constitution of interaction". In the ambit of the strategic analysis, structures take on the configuration of knowledge and resources of which the actors make use in the course of interactions; at the level of institutional analysis, rules and resources should be treated as institutional features of interactive systems. The modalities constitute, thus, the element of mediation between the poles of the duality of the structure. It is difficult, nonetheless, really either to feel or to understand the role of these "modalities", the meaning and utility of which Giddens has still to demonstrate in his more empirically oriented research. In spite of that, several of the suggestions and insights that follow from these cardinal propositions are very interesting and creative, especially because they bring together in a synthetical way many

²⁶Idem, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 80 and 92.

different strands of contemporary social theory, the details of which fall outside the scope of our discussion.²⁷

Margaret Archer has charged Giddens with the lack of recognition of the real discontinuities between action and system, concomitantly to the mistake of transposing the dualism from the methodological to the theoretical sphere. She evoked for that the notion of **emergent properties**, whereby she endeavoured to stress and answer the questions derived from that ontological discontinuity.²⁸ I shall return to this notion, in order to revise it, when examining Parsons' theory. For the moment it must be merely noted that Giddens radically disavows the validity of such a conceptualisation, criticising Durkheim's mineralogical analogies. He correctly affirms that, if it is not possible to speak about individuals except in interaction, the notion of "emergent properties" is meaningless.²⁹ The terrain is, however, slippery and his difficulties are made manifest when he comes up with the awkward statement according to which individuals "decide" to take decisions in the context of what he refuses to accept as "collective actors". The inconsistencies are flagrant: in one passage the notion of interaction underpins the rejection of the "emergent properties"; in the other, he postulates the autonomy of individuals *vis-à-vis* interactions. An *a priori* and far-fetched individualistic position hinders any proper consideration of this crucial question.

²⁷See especially the figures in Idem, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, p. 122, and in *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 80-2 - as well as the extensive discussion articulated in the latter.

²⁸M. S. Archer, op. cit., p. 467.

²⁹A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, p. 171.

Departing from a phenomenological stance, Bernd KieBling has accused Giddens of the opposite sin - "objectivism". The concept of "practical consciousness", far from underlying human reflexivity, would dispose of our communicative capacities, since it reintroduces the structures in the consciousness of the actor.³⁰ Once more the duality of structure is under strain and, although KieBling's perspective puts excessive emphasis on an unbounded human reflexive faculty (without real consideration of Giddens' discussion on the **decentring of the subject** and of his stratified model of consciousness), he succeeds in exposing the uncertain character of the latter's concept of structure. This issue will be taken up again in chapter six of this study. It is necessary to observe now, however, that if the distinction between system and structure is fundamental, the meaning of the latter should hark back to the functionalists' usage, rather than to the structuralists' version, in the last instance the one adopted by Giddens. It should be regarded as descriptive and, therefore, as analogous to Bourdieu's idea of model, with no claims about a coherent and non-contradictory structural reality being laid down. This does not mean to say that Giddens' suggestion of a methodological "bracketing" has no relevance, although it will need to be reassessed when we turn to the discussion of collective subjectivity.

Giddens intends to establish his own depiction of the relations between "social integration" and "systemic integration". For him, the smallest social systems are "dyadic". The concept of integration refers to the degree of

³⁰Bernd KieBling, *Kritik des Giddensschen Sozialtheorie*, Frankfurt, Peterlang, 1988, particularly pp. 197-8.

interdependence of action or its "systemness", regular processes of interchange or reciprocity of practices between actors and collectivities. These two forms of integration are, however, distinct: whereas social integration comes about at the level of "face to face" interaction, systemic integration obtains in relations of "absence", which tend to coincide with relations between social systems and collectivities. Their mechanisms are different, inasmuch as social integration always happens via reflexively monitored conduct, what just incompletely occurs in the systemic case. Institutions play a crucial role in system integration, consisting in patterned modes of behaviour.³¹ But Giddens makes a point of drawing attention to two elements, whereupon we will dwell below, advancing the idea that "the expansion of attempts at reflexive self-regulation at the level of system integration is evidently one of the principal features of the contemporary world". The two "most pervasive types of social mobilization in modern times" - the "'legal-rational' social **organization**" and the "secular **social movement**" - are closely connected to this expansion of rationality.³²

Giddens wants to discard the notion of function, denying any positive consequences as to its use in the social sciences. Only under one aspect does he regard it as relevant: namely if functional statements can be transformed in

³¹A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 73ff. He prefers these concepts to the micro/ macro distinction, stressing also the historical variation of social and system integration in Idem, *The Constitution of Society*, pp. 139ff.

³²Idem, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 79.

contra-factual propositions.³³ He believes that functionalists showed wisdom when they underscored how much non-intentional outcomes of action are important in social life; they erred, though, when trying to translate these outcomes into **reasons** or **necessities** of society. He goes on, then, to reject any **teleological** account of social systems' developments.³⁴ His alternative for explanatory purposes in the dimension of systemic integration comprises three ideas, somewhat cryptically expounded. These are "homeostatic loops", self-regulation through feed-back and reflexive self-monitoring.³⁵

This set of proposals is closely connected to the idea of "unintended consequences of action", which he discovers again in Marx. Reflection, let us recall, monitors human conduct. It is not capable, however, of surpassing the fact that human actors are immersed in conditions the knowledge of which is ever limited, as well as it is not powerful enough to foresee the emergence of certain results that were not intended when the action was at first projected - independently of the intended consequences coming about or not. Now, if this is an active mechanism in terms of social integration, as to systemic integration, it has far-reaching importance indeed.³⁶

³³Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 113.

³⁴Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 78-9. This book is, incidentally, proposed as a "non-functional manifest" (p. 7).

³⁵Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 115ff.

³⁶See, for instance, Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 56 and 66, and *New Rules of Sociological Method*, p. 77.

Giddens' assessment of the notions of social and system integration, despite a certain awareness of the problem of scale in social life, seems to constitute a drawback, especially if compared to Lockwood's former propositions, which we reviewed in the foregoing chapter (1.IV). Despite his separation between "parts" and "actors" being utterly inadequate, Lockwood was at least concerned with collective actors, which are hinted at in Giddens' formulation only in an absolutely unspecified manner. Functionalist notions are useful, according to Giddens, only as contra-factual statements. This is an important contention, notwithstanding the question of the individualistic limits which are concretely supposed by his notion of unintended consequences of action, even though this does not need to be the case. Social systems have no functions, unless they are intended as such, but undergo processes that entail their reproduction and change. Although functionalists bore this often in mind, they were prone to turn this analytical tool into a substantive dimension of social life. Giddens is correct in eschewing this mistake from his theory.

If we otherwise introduce the importance of collective subjectivity, his concept of unintended consequences of action must be included in a broader picture so that it can help address the contingent character of collective centring and causality - as we shall see later on. In Giddens' construction, active causality is reserved for individuals, but structures - as constraining and enabling - are endowed at least with conditioning causality, by means of their "rules" and "resources". This is even completely lacking in his treatment of social systems, whose internal processes - as described by those three mechanisms - are reduced to the interplay between individuals and structures.

For the moment, I will contend myself with the non-acceptance of social systems as "patterned relations". Together with their specific **properties**, accurately underscored by Giddens and of which structures give us an approximate model, they possess a particular type of causality - a collective one.

III) COLLECTIVE ACTORS, INDIVIDUALISM AND HISTORY

One of Giddens' critics found good reasons to attack his notion of actor, for it would be reductive, focusing only on individuals.³⁷ The problem is not that Giddens completely ignores the question; he grapples with it in **substantive** terms. The quotation makes this clear:

"I shall distinguish two main types of collectivity according to the form of the relations that enter into their reproduction. I shall call these **associations** and **organizations**, and I shall separate them from **social movements**".³⁸

Those first collectivities, associations, would monitor their reproduction without looking forward to controlling or changing the conditions in which it

³⁷B. Hindess, *Choice, Rationality and Social Theory*, pp. 100-1, and *Political Choice & Social Structure*, Aldershot, Edward Elgar, 1989, pp. 6 and 89. We are recurrently warned of this problem also by N. Mouzelis, *Back to Sociological Theory*, chap. 2.

³⁸A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, p. 199.

occurs; the opposite is true for organisations, which are collectivities no longer managed in "traditional" ways, that is they strive to control their own reproduction. On the other hand, "social movements" - not limited to specific locales and not establishing either, unlike the former categories, crystallised internal "roles" - reflexively constitute collective endeavours in search of new forms of life. Organisations came into being with the emergence of agrarian states, but flourished in the modern age, in which social movements consist in the main bearers of a new sort of history, characteristic of, to use Lévi-Strauss's phrase, "hot societies". **Historicity** assumes centre stage as the project of the transformation of the present.³⁹

With this incursion, Giddens only marginally tackles the question of collective subjectivity. It must be considered that this discussion is carried out under the title of "Making History" and that it is not by accident that only his fourth book came to reflect upon these entities. In a body of work projected, if we accept his closest interpreter, Cohen, to develop an "ontological" approach to the social sciences, the precise position of these collectivities reveals very much their status in the general theoretical framework. In fact, they barely constitute even "residual categories". He stresses that collectivities are **not** actors, since they have no "corporeal existence",⁴⁰ a remark similar

³⁹Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 200-3, and "Out of the Orrery: E. P. Thompson on Consciousness and History", as well as, especially, "Time and Social Organizations", in *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*, Cambridge, Polity, 1987. He has more recently sketched a classification intended to clarify the concept of social system, without addressing the underlying theoretical problem. Idem, "Structuration Theory and Sociological Analysis", pp. 302-3.

⁴⁰Idem, *The Constitution of Society*, pp. 220-1.

to, and as misguided as, Harré's. In any case, it gives away Giddens' appreciation of these collectivities in the mould of individual actors. To be sure, collectivities have no body comparable to that of human beings. This does not warrant the denial of their material - "corporal" or "organic" - constitution, and the fact that they depend directly on the "natural" world for their very existence, crucial question on which I shall expand in chapter eight.

At the same time, as has already been mentioned, adopting - in an offhand way - a radical form of atomistic nominalism, he defends the thesis that the participants in these collectivities "decide" (individually) to take decisions. Against this idea, we see authors raise even the limited conditions of decision that are open to prisoners in concentration camps. We do not need to go that far. Individual autonomy is a phenomenon that can be observed in the most painful and coercive situations. This is not tantamount to saying that actors can relinquish participation in certain social systems. We just need to imagine the case of the members of a family, part of which, by definition, those individuals will always be. In other cases, such as those of a worker or a prisoner, the capacity of withdrawal is only limited, in any event, by moral or material constraints. Moreover, the **level of systematicity of interactive relations** in collectivities corresponds to **properties** that cannot be reduced to their individual expression, irrespective of whether individuals can quit a specific social system or not. To begin with, the collective causality of social systems, which can be broken down into the active causality of their members only **analytically**, has its proper sphere of impact. It is necessary to underscore the limits of the "analytical realism" which Giddens purportedly shares with

Parsons and Marx as well as the insufficiency of his discussions on the concepts of "emergent properties" in Durkheim, when answering Archer. If they are not, definitely, "emergent", as properties of social systems they belong in a specific layer of reality. Or else, how to understand the properties of structures and social systems? They are accepted just because they are passive or totally inert? The kinship of this approach with that of Popper, analysed in the end of last chapter (1.VI), stands out, as much as its inconsistency, derived from an unexamined acceptance of the heritage of the Enlightenment.

This theoretical knot is partially responsible for a certain lack of fit between the theory of structuration and Giddens' own empirically oriented research, but for his discussions of individuality in modernity, wherein, of course, the problem is less serious. The more he grapples with explicitly collective phenomena, the less he utilises the concepts of the theory of structuration. More generally, time and again he makes the theoretical framework match the empirical realm by means of *ad hoc* conceptualisations. For example when he mentions a "sense of opposition of interest" between collectivities, having defined, as we have seen, the concept of interest in the context of individual action alone.⁴¹ Or when he mentions the dimension of power (relations of autonomy and dependency), previously defined in terms of individual ontological capacity, with respect to collectivities.⁴² Throughout his reflection on the emergence of the state, of organisations and social movements, this problem is prominent. The idea of "double hermeneutics",

⁴¹Idem, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, p. 232.

⁴²Idem, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 225.

which is aimed at addressing the reabsorption of the social sciences in daily life, and vice versa,⁴³ is to be regarded in similar terms: should we think of it as a relation between individual lay actors and individual social scientists only, and it would be difficult to do justice to its implications in the whole of contemporary social life. Therefore, in spite of all its wealth, there are difficulties with Giddens' theory when applied to empirical situations, not least in the writings of its creator.

Social movements have become a topic of paramount importance in his writings, since they express Giddens' deep concern with social change in the modern world. It is hard to understand so much reliance upon their transformative character, if it is not expected that they would bring about social consequences that individuals in isolation would not be able to, in any of the four institutional axes Giddens identifies in the late modern world.⁴⁴ Take, moreover, the two dimensions he distinguishes under the headings of "life politics" and "emancipatory politics". The latter is defined as the politics of "life chances", oriented towards the liberation of individuals from different types of constraints, seeking the principle of autonomy; the former, revolving around questions of "life style" and "choices", hence around morals to a great extent, is central to the construction of personal identities.⁴⁵ Should we not perceive the dimension of life politics - as well as that of emancipatory

⁴³For this concept, see especially Idem, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, p. 79.

⁴⁴Idem, *The Nation-State and Violence*, Cambridge, Polity, 1985, pp. 219ff; and *The Consequences of Modernity*, chap. V.

⁴⁵Idem, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 210-5.

movements - as developed by the constitution of collective subjectivities? Social movements, sometimes loosely centred and with no general plan or direction, collectively accomplish the creation of new styles of life. In this case also an individualistic approach seems to be insufficient.

The historical evolution of social formations is not a direct concern of my research, but the themes we have been focusing on lead us up inevitably to the fringes of this problematic. Discussing Giddens' theory one cannot help making a brief reference to his understanding of the theories of evolution, which he in fact disavows, proposing their "deconstruction". I shall not develop a complete analysis of his theses and shall be satisfied with pointing out the place of collective action and collective actors in his account.

First of all, he intends to discard what he calls "unfolding models" of change. Although this does not mean abandoning the notion of development or taking the instance that all social change finds its way through external influences, these are actually issues he wants to raise. Even because the ideas of **inside/ outside** are tied to the entangling of society and state. He constantly alludes to collective subjectivity or collective actors, or at least to things linked to these notions. He speaks of invasions, migrations, trade routes, wars and explorations, observing that all these "episodes" by definition "...involve movements of groups or populations from and to somewhere". Time-space "paths", therefore, are traced by "collectivities rather than individuals". And he goes further to state that "collectivities nominally internal to states" are sometimes "perhaps more strongly integrated into transnational networks" - the

most expressive contemporary example of these being "gigantic transnational corporations".⁴⁶

The problems that are revealed in these passages are not new. Whilst Giddens stresses the role of collectivities, even rendering their **action** more important than that of individuals, if pressed he would probably deny an acknowledgment of these entities as collective subjectivities. It is when he introduces the concepts whereby one could construct "generalizations" in explaining social change that the absence of those categories is negatively highlighted. According to him, there are no "general mechanisms" of social change, much less any unilineal sequence of development; he advances, however, five concepts that would help us grasp the evolving of human history. These are: structural principles, episodic characterisations (delineation of comparable modes of institutional change), intersocietal systems (specification of the relations between societal totalities), time-space edges (indication of connections between societies of differing structural type) and world time (examination of conjunctures in the light of reflexively monitored history).⁴⁷

If he had hinted at the importance of collective subjectivity in a **substantive** manner formerly, theoretically they hold no importance in regard to history and the theory of evolution. Whereas one can guess that collective subjectivity - or at least action (and actors) - is included in the above mentioned "episodic characterisations", one is almost puzzled but the exclusive

⁴⁶Idem, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 223-5.

⁴⁷ *The Constitution of Society*, p. 224.

reference to "human actors" (supposedly, of course, individuals, should one stick to his more general theses).⁴⁸ No commentary on collectivities is advanced. Moreover, he thinks that Marx gave too much importance to class relations and class struggles, a point his Marxist critics do not really try to refute.⁴⁹ This is, in my opinion, a reasonable assertion in relation to most of human history. In spite of that, this was, as we shall see at an appropriate stage, not only a substantive core of Marx's thinking, but it played the role of logical and ontological mediation of individuals, on the one hand, and national societies plus the international system, on the other. Giddens does not bother to offer a substitute to those notions and role.

It is, thus, a little ironic that Giddens' critique of Habermas' "Parsonian-style Weber" chooses to emphasise the "multifarious practices and struggles of concretely located actors", the "conflict and clash of sectional interests" and on the "territoriality and violence of political formations or states".⁵⁰ A critique of an excessive concern with integration and normativity (which would actually furnish the rationale to Parsons' "emergent properties") is certainly

⁴⁸Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁴⁹ Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 256. See, for a Marxist critique, Erik O. Wright, "Models of Historical Trajectory: an Assessment of Giddens's Critique of Marxism", in D. Held and J. B. Thompson, eds., *Social Theories of Modernity: Anthony Giddens and his Critiques*. The discussion of substantive aspects of human history and of the theories of evolution is the gist of Giddens' *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. In this book he even speaks about "activities" of labour unions and parties, and the "role" they played in the transformation of capitalism (p. 226). I have already addressed above the general question of social movements as agencies of change.

⁵⁰A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, pp. xxvi-xxvii; and "Labour and Interaction", in J. B. Thompson and D. Held, eds., *Habermas. Critical Debates*, p. 159.

necessary, but has, nonetheless, been taken too far by Giddens, as I shall make clear later on. Weber, notwithstanding his individualistic methodological bias, dealt brilliantly with collective movements. This would be Giddens concern, just as in Weber's case, only in an unreflected way. This realisation drives us beyond the boundaries of the theory of structuration. For, as I have tried to show above, despite the rich orchestration of Giddens' theory and the synthesis of many diverse currents, there remains an absence in his work, which needs to be filled in with respect to collective subjectivities.

CHAPTER THREE

LIFE-WORLD AND SYSTEM IN HABERMAS'

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

I)SYNTHESIS AND DIALECTICS

Jürgen Habermas has been, for some decades, one the most prolific and consistent writers in the fields of social theory and philosophy. His critical theory has been very much concerned with the reconstruction of the legacy of German philosophy, first basically in a Marxist framework, but increasingly under the influence of Kant. Differently from Giddens, his attempt at theoretical synthesis has been closely connected to more empirically oriented issues, in what he perceives as a Hegelian perspective in methodological terms.¹ The theory of evolution, which he once deemed the basic element of a theory of society² and which at last received a peculiar shape in his hands, supplies foundations to his process of argumentation, since "...in the course of social evolution the object as such changes".³ He rejects, therefore, a more autonomously formulated general theory, although in practice several sections of his work are solely dedicated to analytical reasoning and abstract conceptualisations. This, in fact, brings some problems to his theory, insofar as historically specific questions mingle in an unwarranted manner with truly general considerations.

For Habermas, the multiplicity of paradigms in sociological theory is an illusion, probably the artificial rhetorical product of scientific discourse: the

¹J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1989 (1981), B. I, p. 7.

²Idem, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1973, p. 7.

³Idem, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, p. 447.

only two real paradigms are those of "action" and "system". The dialectical notion of totality had brought them together, but this version of synthesis is regarded by Habermas as untenable. He aims, therefore, at recombining, in a non-trivial or eclectic manner, those two paradigms, which have become the "disjecta membra" of the Hegelian concept of totality that Marx and Lukács would have taken over without reconstruction.⁴

In order to achieve that, Habermas strongly stresses the necessity of forsaking the paradigm of the "philosophy of consciousness". This expression refers to the configuration which the subject received under the sway of the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In particular, he draws attention to the isolation, self-referentiality, clear-cut demarcation and control of an instrumentally oriented ego.⁵ But other issues are present in his characterisation. At the same time as embedding the subject in its interactive settings, he tries to eschew the analysis of consciousness, in its Hegelian or Husserlian versions, and substitute it by procedures directly derived from linguistic philosophy and, to an extent, behavioural psychology. Instead of an intuitive knowledge arrived at by reflection and introspection, and instead of an inquiry into intentions by means of a transcendental analysis of meaning, he opts, thus, for investigations which imply "intersubjective proof". This would be accomplished either through the reconstruction of the logic, rules and

⁴Idem, "Political Experience and the Renewal of Marxist Theory" (1979) and "The Dialectics of Rationalization" (1981), in *Autonomy and Solidarity* (ed. by Peter Dews), London, Verso, 1992, pp. 91, 105 and 113; *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, p. 459.

⁵Idem, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1988 (1985), p. 27.

symbols of language, or through observation of actual behaviour and its structures of signification. These are strategies which Mead in part blended.⁶ He thinks that a philosophy that is based on the assumptions of the transcendental philosophy of the subject cannot escape Hegel's dialectics and its shortcomings.⁷

A further step leads Habermas to denounce the idea of collective subject, which he regards as illegitimate, as an outcome of that perspective. Marx would have speculatively regarded society as a singular subject. For both Marx and Hegel, he argues, that moral totality has become fragmented. To discuss this fragmentation they utilised the model of the disruption of common morality by crime. For Marx, socialism would reconstitute that pristine unity, overcoming the division of society into classes.⁸ In contrast, the theory of communicative action does not contemplate the process of rationalisation as the unfolding of a "macro-subject" that undergoes a moral evolution towards higher unity - instead, the accent is shifted to intersubjectivity.⁹

Habermas is quite aware that Marx did not imagine a simple transposition of attributes of individuals - such as consciousness, interest and action - to the

⁶Idem, "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften" (1967), in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1982, pp. 240-1; *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, pp. 11-4.

⁷Idem, "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", p. 93.

⁸Idem, *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1991 (1968), pp. 73-5 and 77ff.

⁹Idem, *Die philosophische Diskur der Moderne*, pp. 396-403.

collective level, which is intersubjectively constituted.¹⁰ He also once alluded to the dialectics of the general and the particular when he stated that the identity of individuals is formed within groups which relate to other groups. Furthermore, they would obey general practical rules and the communication between them might be distorted, although this could be surmounted through a process of enlightenment.¹¹ He observed subsequently that he conceives of totalities as forms which overlap and intertwine, even though - contrary to Marx's view - they do not constitute a "supertotality", since the "general" would now be more "fragile".¹² This obtains regardless of the fact that, but also insofar as, he criticises the inconsistency of the notion of collective subject in Hegel, Marx and Lukács, and also the supposed idealism of the idea of the "concrete universal".¹³ Such collective subjects would merely "hypostatise" intersubjective relations.¹⁴ This does not make things easier for a precise understanding of his incidental declaration that society is a

¹⁰Idem, "Einleitung zur Neusausgabe" (1971) to *Theorie und Praxis*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1988, p. 20.

¹¹Idem, "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", p. 298; "Einleitung zur Neusausgabe", p. 35. See also his "Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Niklas Luhmann", in J. Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1985 (1971), p. 217.

¹²Idem, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Modern*, pp. 396-7.

¹³Idem, "Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Niklas Luhmann", pp. 179-80. In the same text (note 16, p. 217), he ties, however, moral issues in with the dialectics between the individual, the particular and the general.

¹⁴Idem, "A Reply", in Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, eds., *Communicative Action. Essays on Jürgen Habermas The Theory of Communicative Action*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991 (1986), p. 250.

"systemically integrated action network (*Handlungszusammenhänge*) of socially integrated groups".¹⁵

Habermas has not tackled the reformulation of Hegel's logic because he has never felt it was necessary.¹⁶ In any case, Jay has precisely underlined that, although in his first writings Habermas adhered to an essentially Marxist view of totality, he came afterwards to strive to recast this concept in distinct terms.¹⁷ Alongside Giddens' and a handful of other theories, Habermas holds centre stage in the contemporary movement towards theoretical syntheses. However, his overall rejection of dialectics¹⁸, in particular with respect to the constitution of collective subjectivities, creates insurmountable problems. This seems not to happen by accident, nonetheless, insofar as his work has been revealing more explicitly his commitment to the Enlightenment and its theoretical and moral tenets, moving away from Marx's insights. An attachment to the poles of the individual and the social system is therefore likely to follow.

¹⁵Idem, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, p. 301.

¹⁶Idem, "Vorwort zur Neuausgabe" (1982) to *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaft*, p. 9.

¹⁷M. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, pp. 469-73. For Habermas' early thoughts on this subject, see his contributions - "The Analytical Theory of Science and Dialectics" and "A Positivistically Bisected Rationalism", to T. W. Adorno, ed., *op. cit.*

¹⁸Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of Dialectic*, New York, Verso, 1990, pp. 7, 237 and 240.

This refusal of dialectics has led him towards several dichotomies (rather than distinctions, as McCarthy would have it¹⁹): in terms of his conception of action and system or structure, the most important for us are those which oppose communicative to instrumental and strategic action, on the one hand, and life-world to systems on the other. As we shall see, there is in fact a blurred underlying distinction of causality in relation to each of these dichotomies, whose correlations with the two extremes of each pair he has not actually worked out very clearly. The sharp separation between history as narrative and the theory of evolution reproduces these dichotomies.

Many authors have criticised Habermas for his lack of understanding of the role of collectivities in history, usually from a standpoint that results, however directly or indirectly, from Marxism. Some contend that the attribution of a central role to groups and collective actors would by no means imply the reification of a "macro-subject".²⁰ It is not that Habermas pays no heed to collectivities in history: he often addresses the point; in particular, he recurrently speaks about "social groups", rather than classes. The problem is

¹⁹Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, Cambridge, Polity, 1984 (1974), p. 23.

²⁰A. Honneth, *Kritik der Macht*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1985, pp. 313-4; H. Joas, "The Unhappy Marriage of Hermeneutics and Positivism", in A. Honneth and H. Joas, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 114; P. Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, New York/ London, Verso, 1983, p. 67. Whilst Mouzelis is correct in pointing to the absence of collective actors in Habermas, he seems to be prone, however, to a form of reification. See N. Mouzelis, "Appendix I" to *Back to Sociological Theory*. I have already mentioned Giddens' somewhat unwarranted remarks on the topic in chap. 2.III.

that their status remains unclarified throughout.²¹ Others, closer to Habermas, discard for instance classes as collective subjects and wish to focus on social movements, but think that the theory of communicative action misses the strategic aspect of collective action.²² In any case, concentration on system analysis provokes the receding of the practical-political activity of social agents to the background.²³

Habermas' statement on the existence of only two paradigms in sociology - those of "action" and "system" - is not precise. He has confused the real and manifest multiplicity of research programmes with two problems which sociological theories have necessarily to grapple with, especially inasmuch as they remain - as he himself does - committed to the traditional polarisation of bourgeois thought. That characterisation of two paradigms is indeed effectual to state his case on how a new synthesis should be achieved. On the other hand, he has had in practice to synthesise diverse strands of thought, an endeavour in which the enormous reach of his readings comes to the fore. From the classics of Marxism and of sociology, through German traditions, such as transcendental philosophy plus hermeneutics, and behavioural analysis, to contemporary legacies, such as micro-sociologies and Parsonian-Luhmannian functionalism, Wittgensteinian language-games and linguistic philosophy, as well as genetic structuralism, Habermas has faced up to challenges ensuing

²¹A. Heller, "Habermas and Marxism", in J. B. Thompson and D. Held, eds., *Habermas. Critical Debates*, p. 30.

²²Klaus Eder, *The New Politics of Class*, London, Sage, 1993, pp. 52 and 61.

²³T. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

from different corners in order to reshape the critical theory he inherited from the Frankfurt School.²⁴

In *Knowledge and Interest*, Habermas attempted to ground critical theory by means of an examination of the interests that underpin science. He underscored, in particular, the interest in emancipation that calls forth a critical approach. The other two approaches consisted in the empirical-analytical (nomological) sciences, oriented towards control, and the hermeneutic sciences, interested in the enlargement of the (self-)understanding of human groups.²⁵ This book dwelled upon epistemological issues. Concomitantly, he resumed his original efforts to carve out a theory of society, which culminated in his *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

II) ACTION, LIFE-WORLD AND SYSTEM

His first serious move in that direction consisted of an analysis of the philosophy of the young Hegel. In his Jena period Hegel had depicted the different aspects of the dialectics of subjectivity: "representation", labour and struggle. Rather than a Spirit manifesting itself in language, labour and moral

²⁴He has in fact proposed a classification of theories according to their "holistic" or "atomistic" (*elementaristischen*) point of view, on the one hand, and their basic action concepts, on the other. See J. Habermas, "Vorlesungen zu einer sprachtheoretischen Grundlegung der Soziologie" (1970/1), in *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1984, pp. 23ff. He was otherwise predisposed to associate the dissolution of Marx's concept of totality with the proliferation of autonomous disciplines. See Idem, "Zwischen Philosophie und Wissenschaft: Marxismus als Kritik" (1963), in *Theorie und Praxis*, p. 238.

²⁵Idem, *Erkenntnis und Interest*, passim.

relations in the absolute movement of reflection, it was the dialectics of linguistic symbolism, labour and interaction that defined the concept of Spirit. For Hegel, at this stage, being was the means whereby identity was interactively moulded, not the ultimate foundation of self-consciousness. But he changed his standpoint, embracing the idea of a movement of morality in dialectical evolution, in the course which the Absolute Spirit constitutes itself. Habermas maintains that, without cognizance of Hegel's Jena phase, Marx resumed the thematic of labour and interaction in *The German Ideology*, reducing, however, the latter to the former.²⁶ Habermas strongly criticised Marx in this respect and introduced a distinction that became crucial for his theoretical development: he differentiated between "instrumental action" and "communicative action". The first is "monological", the second "intersubjective". To an extent it recouched a distinction already present in *Knowledge and Interest*; nonetheless, the idea of interaction received pride of place in the study of Hegel.

One year later his formulation acquired a much more explicit gist. He interpreted labour as pure instrumental action, in contrast to communicative action, which mediates interactions structured via symbols and norms. The "institutional framework" of society was furnished by the "life-world" and the moral normativity therein produced. The "subsystems" of instrumental and strategic action (respectively related to the economy and to the state administration) were seen as independent of the life-world in certain measure,

²⁶J. Habermas, "Arbeit und Interaktion. Bemerkungen zu Hegels Jenenses 'Philosophie des Geistes'" (1967), in *Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1968.

but their normativity would derive from that institutional kernel. The dynamic of capitalism, he contended, tends to subordinate the life-world to the requirements of those subsystems.²⁷ We have, in a nutshell, the theses that Habermas has subsequently fully developed. We should add to this that the notion of communicative action transposes the idea he discussed in his first book, that of a public sphere in which rational argumentation is carried out, to a more general theoretical level; the same is true as for the systems' logic which, appearing in that first version in connection with mass participation and the fall of the bourgeois public sphere, assumed the general form of subsystems of purposive-rational action that menace the life-world.²⁸ Let us explore the unfolding of these ideas and the problems ingrained therein.

According to Habermas, action oriented towards "understanding" is the basic form of social action. All other forms - struggle, competition, in particular strategic action - are derived from this primary one, wherein we treat a subject as somebody capable of reflexivity, not as an object.²⁹ An intersubjectively shared life-world is essential to the reproduction of the life of the species. Therefore, "communicative *praxis*" holds centre stage for him - although action should not be reduced to speech nor interaction to conversation, and the rare realisation of its idealised theoretical form

²⁷Idem, "Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie", in *Ibid.*, pp. 62-70.

²⁸Idem, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, passim.

²⁹Idem, "Vorbereitende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie der kommunikativen Kompetenz", in J. Habermas and N. Luhmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-9; "Was heit Universalpragmatik?" (1976), in *Vorstudien und Ergnzung zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, p. 353.

notwithstanding either.³⁰ Social life, however, is not wholly covered by this concept alone. Alongside communicative action, he introduces other, exclusively "teleological" types: instrumental action and strategic action. In both of them the actor pursues a goal, choosing appropriate means, and acts according to maxims, choosing and deciding between alternatives. Whereas instrumental action refers to the interchange of individuals with nature, strategic action belongs in a social dimension, together with communicative action (which possesses a teleological aspect). However, the latter implies an inclination towards "understanding" and "agreement", in contrast to strategically oriented conduct, which handles other agents as manipulable objects in correspondence to one's purposes, rather than as subjects.

However, "pathologies" may come about in the interactive process, producing "systematically distorted communication". Overtly communicative, action may thus include strategic action, implying an unconsciously assumed instrumental attitude. Alternatively, strategic action might be disguised as communicative action in order to achieve calculated manipulation.

Habermas argues that understanding (*Verständigung*) consists in the very telos of human language and that agreement (*Einverständnis*) depends on argumentative processes open to "validity claims". These address: objective truthfulness (collectively agreed upon), insofar as teleological action can be judged according to its efficiency and embodies strategic and technical knowledge; correctness of normative understanding and behaviour in normative action, which embodies moral-practical knowledge; and veracity of personal

³⁰Idem, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 31-7 and 143.

expression, in what he calls "dramaturgic action", in the course of which actors compose a "public" for one another. Linguistic "constative" acts incorporate knowledge and can be criticised according to their truthfulness as well.³¹

"Locutionary" acts, expressing things and facts, "illocutionary" acts, whereby the speaker expresses (states, promises, etc.) something, and "perlocutionary" acts, with which s/he attains an effect on the listener, are the basic elements of speech that permeate action (although understanding is not necessarily linguistically mediated). Thereby Habermas wants to displace the so-called "philosophy of consciousness", for he could analyse interaction by means of an investigation of the structure of language. Therefore, even though he needs to allude to the intentions of actors, he could abdicate from the examination of psychological behavioural dispositions, solely concentrating on the intuitive knowledge of actors as for their attitudes in terms of the general structure of processes of understanding.³²

Writers such as Giddens and Hans Joas have stressed that this typology, instead of being seen as a concrete depiction of types of action, should be regarded as an **analytical** scheme - which Joas sees as incomplete, and which for Giddens is an inaccurate synthesis Marx's and Weber's very heterogeneous insights. In turn, Alexander believes that Habermas' distinctions are loaded with "heavy conflationary baggage". Moreover, they and others have repeatedly censured Habermas for the distortion and impoverishment of Marx's concept

³¹I brought together two typologies and their derivations, which Habermas develops in Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 126ff, 148ff, 381ff and 445-6.

³²Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 372 and 385ff; see also "Was heißt Universalpragmatik?"

of labour, which is exiled into the realm of instrumental action, and for disconnecting communication from other phenomena such as power relations as well as tending to reduce interaction to action, and action to speech acts.³³ Habermas is, however, unyielding: whilst he acknowledges the lack of clarity of some of his statements - and cryptically observes that "all understanding is simultaneously non-comprehension" - he has reaffirmed all his own basic ideas, adding that he is not interested in devising a somewhat dubious general anthropological categorisation of action.³⁴

However, particularly strange seems to be his return to actors' intentions so that he would be able to clearly establish the concrete type of action they plan to carry out - whether communicative or strategic. It is difficult to visualise how this could be done by linguistic means alone. For this and other

³³A. Giddens, "Labour and Interaction", in D. H. and J. B. Thompson, eds., *Habermas. Critical Debates*, pp. 150 and 156-7; also "Reason without Revolution? Habermas *Theory of Communicative Action*" (1982), in *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*; H. Joas, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-101; J. C. Alexander, "Habermas and Critical Theory: beyond the Marxian Dilemma?", in H. Joas and A. Honneth, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 63 (the same being valid for illocution and perlocution, p. 68); A. Honneth, *op. cit.*, pp. 265 and 317-31. See also P. Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, pp. 60ff, and J. B. Thompson, "Universal Pragmatics", in J. B. Thompson and D. Held, eds., *Habermas. Critical Debates*. The force of that latter criticism was weakened with the publication of his major book, for Habermas more clearly distinguished action from speech acts therein.

³⁴J. Habermas, "A Reply to my Critics", in J. B. Thompson and D. Held, eds., *Habermas. Critical Debates*, pp. 244-69; "A Reply", in A. Honneth and H. Joas, eds., *op. cit.*, pp. 233-49. That notwithstanding, he has elsewhere recognised labour as an "exemplary case" of social action, presupposing the cooperation of actors so as to coordinate their instrumental action, even though this is only one variety of interaction. See, for instance, Idem, "Erläuterung zum Begriff des kommunikativen Handelns" (1982), in *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, p. 571.

reasons which I shall introduce shortly, his recommendation to completely relinquish the "philosophy of consciousness" turns out to be rather partial in practice and, in fact, unnecessary. In contrast, even when focusing on actors' intentions, the analytical character of those types and their concrete presence in interactive processes should be borne in mind, the attitude chosen by the actor notwithstanding. As we shall see later on, instrumental exchanges with nature - though not necessarily under the form of productive labour - are a requisite part of interactions, just as communicative and strategic aspects are present in all kinds of action and interaction, as will soon be clear below.

As can already be guessed, the concept of life-world is for Habermas closely related to processes of understanding: therein communicative subjects come to agreements. The life-world, more or less vaguely constituted, counts on background, non-problematic presuppositions, which demarcate a "community of communication" *vis-à-vis* other collectivities. It builds on the work of former generations and, providing a reservoir of given and tacit matters, protects against the risks of dissent that haunt each concrete process of understanding, although its rationalisation makes this guardianship ever more reflexive. Language and culture are constitutive elements of the life-world, within the horizon of which communicative agents move and out of which they cannot step.³⁵

Under Mead's influence, Schutz had already described the life-world intersubjectively; his analyses still remained, nonetheless, in the surroundings of Husserl's phenomenology and thus devoted to the experiences of actors.

³⁵Idem, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 107-8 and 188ff.

According to Habermas, it is necessary to eschew this approach and adopt a linguistic alternative, whereby a hermeneutic, "formal-pragmatic" **reconstruction** of a life-world which is accessible to its own members can be undertaken. It is not the content of specific life-worlds that interests Habermas; he is concerned with the general structure that (in "quasi-transcendental" terms) is common to all of them. Sociologically, though, the phenomenological everyday concept of life-world is deemed essential: it allows for the analysis of interaction in time and space. Narrative processes are fundamental for this analysis. Culture (as a stock of knowledge), personality (as the competence of speech and action that enables the affirmation of an identity) and society (as a legitimate order) are the structural components of the life-world, correlated respectively to cultural reproduction, socialisation (meaning the acquisition of those competencies) and social integration. Moreover, Habermas draws attention to the dependency of the web of quotidian communicative action - within which culture, society and personality are reproduced - upon processes of **material reproduction** of the life-world. This reproduction is achieved through the interchange with nature carried out by instrumentally oriented individuals. Thereby Habermas intends to surpass a culturalist concept of life-world, although it could be argued that those linguistic and sociological strategies are not clearly connected in the course of his exposition.³⁶

³⁶Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 179-82, 197-8, 206-12 and 223-4. For more on that "reconstructive science", see his "Was heit Universalpragmatik?" and "Reconstruction and Interpretation in the Social Sciences" (1983), in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Cambridge, Polity, 1990. For that critique, see Herbert Schndelbach, "The Transformation of Critical Theory", in A. Honneth and H. Joas, *op. cit.*, p. 17. Habermas extensively reviewed the literature on socialisation, maintaining the importance of childhood for the

Time and again, contrary to an idealistic version of hermeneutics, Habermas has underscored that not only "language", but also "labour" and "domination" - through force (*Gewalt*) and power (*Macht*), the latter comprising institutional domains of society - are pervasive aspects of social life; stratification, moreover, is something that came about early in the evolution of the species. Generally speaking, society and life-world must not be conflated.³⁷ Society appears as a multidimensional reality, which demands several approaches in order that it be comprehensively grasped. Social relations, therefore, cannot be exhaustively surveyed by linguistic means. Many other dimensions must be focused on so as to reach a general understanding of social life. We must add to this that the links between the formal-pragmatic reconstruction of the life-world and its sociological version - which at least originally implied an analysis of the processes of typification and construction of taken-for-grantedness in each actor's consciousness - is not

formation of personality. He shows little sympathy for psychoanalysis, however, borrowing much more from social and ego psychology as well as from Piaget's genetic epistemology. See J. Habermas, "Stichworte zu einer Theorie der Sozialisation" (1968) and "Notizen zum Begriff der Rollenkompetenz" (1972), in *Kultur und Kritik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1973; plus "Notizen zur Entwicklung der Interaktionskompetenz" (1974), in *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. For a powerful critique from a Freudian angle, see Joel Whitebook, "Reason and Happiness: some Psychoanalytic Themes in Critical Theory", in R. Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity, 1985.

³⁷J. Habermas, "Erkenntnis und Interest" (1965), in *Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie*, pp. 162-3. "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", p. 309; "Die Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik" (1970), in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, pp. 345ff; "Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie?", p. 254. "Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus" (1975), in *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1990 (1976), pp. 145-51; *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, pp. 223-6; "A Reply to my Critics", p. 269.

precisely established. In addition, Habermas introduces a systemic approach so as to grapple with contemporary society. It is, thus, apparent that the project of burying the "philosophy of the consciousness" by strictly relying upon linguistic philosophy begs a great many questions.

In fact, I shall prefer to speak of the overcoming of the **philosophy of the subject**. By this I mean to indict that characterisation of the subject in the Cartesian-Hobbesian mould analysed in chapter one. I do not want either to reject or acquiesce to introspective means of inquiry into consciousness; although I tend to sympathise with Habermas in this regard and despite the fact that linguistic or discourse analyses are certainly valuable tools for social scientists, it is not necessary to settle this dispute herein. Suffice it to notice that the analysis of the processes of constitution of collective and individual identity and awareness have a great deal to learn from vital insights of that tradition, providing that we connect such investigations to the whole of **social relations**, breaking free from the isolation and sharp demarcation of those traditionally conceived subjects.

Rationalisation has been probably the core question in the development of Habermas' thinking. Drawing upon Popper, he establishes a threefold division between the objective natural world, the social world and its normativity, and the subjective world of individuals. At first, in "archaic", i.e. palaeolithic or neolithic, societies these three "worlds" would be hardly distinguished in the world images shared by the members of those "forms of life". Heavily leaning on Durkheim and above all on Piaget, who supplies an optimistic counter-balance to the pessimism of Weber and the Frankfurt School

(and their meditation only on the growth of instrumental rationality), Habermas connects the process of communicative rationalisation of the life-world to its progressive **decentring**. Those three worlds become, thus, differentiated in the world-views, which grow, in turn, ever more flexible and open to argumentation, to the point at which they mature into "interpretations of the world". Individuals, who can now put distance between themselves and society, are eventually apt to treat its normativity critically and reflexively in a more plastic form of communicative action. Nature is no longer collapsed into an extension of an egocentrically instituted social perspective. Individualisation, piecemeal universalisation and increase in abstraction of the collective identity, morality and legality - yielding "value generalisation" - are processes that accompany that growth in reflexivity, alongside the formation of specialised areas of knowledge.³⁸

This process of rationalisation makes room for a complexification of society and a proliferation of diversified life-worlds. Moreover, it both permits and demands the differentiation of subsystems of instrumentally oriented action. The weakening of traditional world images and the growth of a space of contingency in interactions entail an overburdening of the mechanisms of understanding with increasing demands of coordination. Simultaneously, new types of organisation and institution historically rise and multiply, based on

³⁸Idem, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 73ff and B. II, pp. 164 and 219ff. See also his "Einleitung: Historischen Materialismus und die Entwicklung normativer Strukturen" (1976), in *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*. For the paramount role played by Piaget in his major work, see Barbara Freitag, "Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns und Genetische Psychologie", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, v. 35, 1983 (555:576).

two means of communication - money and power - that substitute language. These "media" make possible the differentiation of subsystems of instrumental action, which remain connected to the life-world via its moral-practical grounding and the legitimacy of the legal order thereupon erected. Instrumental and strategic action can now move in independency from communicative action. This means that an "uncoupling" of certain interactive processes from the life-world has come about.³⁹

Two forms of **integration** of society are now at work, even though they are not utterly disjointed:

The analysis of these relations is only possible when we distinguish between the mechanisms of action coordination that match the **action orientations** of the participants in relation to each other from mechanisms that stabilise non-intended action relations through the functional webbing of **consequences of action**. The integration of the system of action is produced in one case via normatively secured or communicatively generated consensus, in the other case via a non-normative regulation of individual decisions, which works over the consciousness of the actors. The differentiation between **social integration**, which rests upon action orientations, and **system integration**, which

³⁹J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 109 and 458; B. II, pp. 259-73.

subdues action orientations, demands a corresponding differentiation in the concept of society itself.⁴⁰

In the case of social integration we are faced with a life-world which must be reconstructed according to the perspective of its members. Conversely, when dealing with system integration we take the position of an external observer who scrutinises individual action in regard to its contribution to the maintenance of a functionally structured system.

Even in his first writings, despite reservations, Habermas did not evince thorough hostility against functionalism. To be sure, he has always opposed a claim to "universality" by system theorists, whose work he regards, to an extent, as a superior form of technocratic consciousness. He has consistently attacked the idea of self-sufficiency and self-reflexibility of social systems, which, he thinks, basically reproduces the basic tenets of the "philosophy of consciousness" in another dimension; it would, moreover, drain them of meaning, which must inevitably be referred to individuals. The fact that social systems are culturally patterned and not merely organically constituted has regularly brought him to underline the difficulty of providing criteria for the definition of death or conservation as well as of the boundaries of societies against a shifting and complex "environment".⁴¹ But at the very start he

⁴⁰Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 179 - and further on, pp. 228-30. This distinction seems to have been introduced in his *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, pp. 13-4.

⁴¹Idem, "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", pp. 194-6; "Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie?", especially pp. 144, 151, 217 and 271-2; *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, pp. 415ff.

observed too that functionalism does not need to be reductionist, anti-historical or anti-conflict, let alone its potential critical utilisation.⁴²

Thus, even though Habermas recurrently hints at the underlying basis of this sort of systemic approach in action presuppositions, he tends, as we have seen, to play off action against systemic "paradigms". He overlooks the fact that social systems theory is by no means a unified field. On the contrary, several paradigms have tackled the systematicity of action and interaction in social life, making use sometimes of notions derived from biology and from Norbert Wiener's work on systems and cybernetics. Others - such as the young Parsons, and to a certain extent the late one as well - gave preeminence to the idea of **systems of action**. This is the case with Giddens, evidently, and also with Alexander. Habermas overemphasises the moral dimension of the life-world and draws an instrumental systemic sphere totally devoid of some of the basic features of social life. Had he wanted to build two broad ideal-types then his case would be more defensible. As it stands, it seems hardly tenable, contradicting the actual multidimensional intertwinement of different logics of rationalisation that obtain in contemporary society, as it did in previous forms of life.⁴³

For, in spite of his own reservations, Habermas produces a discussion on contemporary society which places great stress on the autonomisation of the capitalist economy and of the state apparatus, addressed basically in connection

⁴²Idem, "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", pp. 325-7.

⁴³J. C. Alexander, "Habermas and Critical Theory: beyond the Marxian Dilemma?", p. 60.

with the administrative system, rather than with focus on its political dimension proper. These domains now become independent from the pre-theoretical understanding that individuals enjoy within the horizon of their life-world. **Organisations** consist in the archetypal entities of these "self-steered" and "boundary-maintaining" subsystems. They gain "autonomy", he argues, through a "demarcation in the face of the life-world", which neutralises it. Thereby they manage to become **indifferent** as to "culture, society and personality", acquiring independence from the dispositions and ends of their members, and in particular offsetting their peculiar, personal traits. Culture plays therein simply an instrumental role and juridification (*Verrechtlichung*) steals the ground from a faint, though minimally persistent, voice of communicative action, which still entwines interactions within organisations. He posits, however, that the bonds between individuals and organisations are in part founded in the **interests** of the former.⁴⁴

His circumspection with respect to Parsons' theory of the "media of communication" once again notwithstanding, he makes large use of this idea. Influence and value-commitments cannot be placed too closely to money and power, since they are neither so calculable nor so manipulable. They cannot be detached from the life-world at all. Even power must not be equated with money, inasmuch as it requires legitimacy and not just cover (force in one case, gold in the other) or legality; it is not that calculable either, demanding

⁴⁴J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, pp. 226, 240ff, 453-60 and 478. See also pp. 507ff.

continuous exercise.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, money and power alike substitute linguistic understanding and break free from normativity (despite their ultimate institutional anchoring in the life-world), mediate between systems and the life-world, and functionally specify the processes of social cooperation. The economy as a subsystem can only develop autonomously to the extent that its interchange with the "environment" is operated via money.⁴⁶

As critics have pointed out, a central problem in Habermas' employment of system concepts concerns the fact that all his reading of the notion of system stems from his acquaintance with Luhmann's functional-structuralism⁴⁷, which takes up developments in cybernetics and neighbouring fields. According to Alexander, Luhmann distorted Parsons' ideas, depersonifying and emptying social systems of meaning.⁴⁸ Although Habermas has at times clearly proposed to see the distinction between life-world and system - and in particular, between the rationalisation of the former and the differentiation of the latter - as one that pertains only to the analytical level, observing in addition that the first concept is broader and encompasses

⁴⁵Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 386-412.

⁴⁶Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 240, 256, 269-70.

⁴⁷Luhmann has, in fact, advanced a claim to "universality", though not exclusivity, in, "Systemtheoretische Argumentation. Eine Entgegnung auf Jürgen Habermas", in J. Habermas and N. Luhmann, *op. cit.*, p. 378. He fully developed his theory in his *Soziale Systeme*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1984.

⁴⁸J. C. Alexander, "The Parsons Revival in German Sociology", *Sociological Theory*, v. 2, 1984 (394:412), pp. 401-2.

the second⁴⁹, he has actually come to suggest the view that systems steered by money and power are present in **substantive** terms in the contemporary world.⁵⁰

The notion of social system I shall retain is quite different from the one preferred by Habermas. It is much closer to Giddens', providing that the problems discussed in the preceding chapter are borne in mind. The features of the "life-world" and the so-called "systems" are, consequently, to be seen as aspects of all **systems of action**, irrespective of the peculiar logics and (im)balances that obtain within them. As stated, action has multiple expressions and the distinctions Habermas has proposed should be held only analytically, since they obtain across the full range of social systems. In turn, culture is present in all of them. To be sure, at times the dryness and emptiness of some of their varieties may be rather depressing, such as the case of the utilitarian-privatist breed and the neutral and objectifying attitude shot through contemporary society (within and without formal organisations) - to which Habermas himself has pointed.⁵¹ Moreover, the bottom line of internal consensus in the theory of organisations has conclusively settled that these

⁴⁹J. Habermas, "Geschichte und Evolution" (1976), in *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*, pp. 222-3; *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, p. 450; "A Reply", p. 262.

⁵⁰Idem, "A Reply", p. 256.

⁵¹Idem, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, pp. 105ff; *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 310-1.

action systems cannot ever completely do away with their members' interests, intentions and personal backgrounds.⁵²

Hence, it is difficult to see how such a conception of "system" can be upheld once it is accepted that they do not evade the intentions of individuals, even though here, as much as elsewhere, **unintended consequences of action** are of paramount importance. The idea that the life-world depends so directly on the intentions and knowledge of the participants suffers from a reverse deficiency: as Habermas himself explains, the participants do not even fully realise the comprehensive features of their life-worlds, which can be examined, according to him, only piecemeal.⁵³ Giddens' concept of **practical consciousness** could play a key role in this regard. **Bounded rationality** (instrumental or communicative) is pervasive in the life-world as well as unintended consequences of action. Even such sweeping **intuitive knowledge** of the life-world's members is debatable, especially if the complexities of contemporary societies are brought to bear. Neither are systems so opaque and independent nor are life-worlds so cosy and answerable to actors. The abandonment by Habermas of the idea of an elementary difference between the participants' and the observers' perspective to ground **methodologically** the **theoretical** split between life-world and system⁵⁴ has further weakened his proposal. In certain measure, it could be said that his effort at synthesis is, thus, only incompletely successful.

⁵²See N. Mouzelis, "Appendix I", pp. 178-80.

⁵³J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, pp. 188-9.

⁵⁴Idem, "A Reply", p. 254.

An additional intricacy seeps through Habermas' concept of life-world in its definition as a **totality**. Formerly Habermas seemed to visualise only **one** life-world in the whole of society.⁵⁵ He moved on to assert their multiplicity in societies that have left the "archaic" stage. Whereas they constituted therein "unbroken" (*bruchlos*) forms of life, their progressive differentiation entailed the demarcation of different collective life-worlds in each society, eventuating a fragmentation of consciousness in late capitalism. He is relatively aware of the fact that the notion of a homogeneous life-world is an idealisation, for "archaic" societies are already fairly complex. He also perceives the multiplicity of life-worlds in "traditional" societies. But, in general, he wants to contrast those differentiated life-worlds to modern ones. He complements his portrait of modernity, noticing that, following the differentiation and rationalisation of the structures of the life-world, expert cultures established specialised domains of art and critique, science and technique, morals and law.⁵⁶ He seems not to be very sure about the "totalising" character of life-worlds in contemporary society, which he alternately denies and maintains.⁵⁷ In any case, we are given the impression that he attributes an unlikely "intimate" character to life-worlds even in modern societies.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Idem, "Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie", p. 65.

⁵⁶Idem, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 125, 226-34; B. II, pp. 168-9, 233-54 and 521.

⁵⁷Idem, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, p. 91; B. II, p. 134. *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, pp. 348-9; "Questions and Counterquestions", in R. Bernstein, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 194 and 197.

⁵⁸H. Joas, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

We saw above how Habermas flirts with the Hegelian dialectics of the general, the particular and the singular when addressing this issue. His lack of sympathy for dialectics, however, prevents him from effectively settling the issue. An absorbing and evenly distributed structuring of the life-world, dependent upon a Kantian view of totality, can certainly be disputed. This is especially true if we recognise that ideologies become much more heterogeneous in the subordinate layers of society⁵⁹ and if Schutz's partly idiosyncratic individuals' life-worlds is not overlooked. Conversely, that Kantian-Weberian differentiation of spheres may be in fact an ideological delusion heavily paid for,⁶⁰ belied by the prevalence of general ideologies Habermas himself once denounced,⁶¹ the fragmentation of consciousness in the popular classes notwithstanding.

This brings Habermas' conception of structure to the fore. He has insightfully observed that current languages cannot be formalised without killing precisely their daily and non-specialised character.⁶² But his combination of a notion of world-views and interpretations inspired by Weber with the tenets of Piagetian genetic structuralism has brought about a view of

⁵⁹A. Swingewood, *The Myth of Mass Culture*, London, Macmillan, 1977, p. 82.

⁶⁰Martin Seel, "The Two Meanings of 'Communicative Rationality': Remarks on Habermas' Critique of a Plural Concept of Reason", in A. Honneth and H. Joas, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 37. For another critic, this happens because Habermas takes Kant too seriously: Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Post-Modernity", in R. Bernstein, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁶¹J. Habermas, "Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie", pp. 64ff.

⁶²Idem, "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", pp. 260 and 267.

structures as something substantial and real, at least in part derived from his Kantian bias and, in any case, have as a consequence the recasting of that philosopher's notion of totality. Habermas has been criticized for the excessive abstractiveness of his conception of morals and its aspiration to avoid the foundations of the concrete form of life from which it emerges.⁶³ Another Hegelian theme, however, must be introduced, with reference to the internal structuring of these totalities, although a broader positive treatment of the issue will have to wait to be developed in further chapters.

The hypothesis of a close identification of the three worlds outlined above is directly related to this problem. Habermas seems to have in fact committed in the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" when he applied Piaget's cognitive and moral developmental concepts to the description and explanation of the "savage mind" and to Durkheim's view of closely integrated primitive communities, wherein there would be no room for individual autonomy. Should we accept, and this is not necessarily the case, the idea of a socio-centred community, which - in principle - precludes reflection and in the limits of which individuals and nature are completely intermeshed and determined by the rigid understanding and parameters of that form of life, it would still remain to be shown that their social relations exactly follow the logic of that idealised world-view. Even at that stage contradictions and thwarted expectations certainly occur, between individuals and groups. This is also how a great deal of actual innovation perhaps comes about. Concerned with their progressive decentring, Habermas applies a reified view of culture to society

⁶³C. Taylor, "Language and Society", in A. Honneth and H. Joas, *op. cit.*

and personality - taking the possible self-understanding of these societies as though it obtained in practice; or else, he displays what more than once I have characterised (see chap. 2.II), borrowing from Bourdieu, as the substitution of reality by a model built by the researcher. It should not be ignored, however, that in the evolving of **social relations** problems are bound to come up which prevent the existence of that integrated a social system.

This drawback ensues despite the definition of the structures of world images or interpretations primarily as the space within which social problems may be solved without reorganisation of highly abstract patterns which Habermas calls "organisational principles" - embedded in the life-world and in which individuals are socialised.⁶⁴ Perhaps this underlies his ambivalence towards the "homologies" of cognitive and moral structures in individuals and societies, for Habermas recognises that these are not substantial nor shared by all individuals, but in fact are unevenly distributed.⁶⁵

Habermas' conception of structure is, hence, as problematical as his notion of social system. Therefore, the entirety of his argument regarding the relationship between structures of consciousness and social movements, which is central to his theory of evolution, demands debate.

⁶⁴Idem, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, p. 18; "Einleitung: Historischen Materialismus und die Entwicklung normativen Strukturen", pp. 18-9; "Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus", pp. 168 and 185; *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 72ff; "A Reply", p. 262.

⁶⁵Idem, "Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus", p. 169; *Theories des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 74-5. "A Philosophical-Political Profile" (1985), in *Autonomy and Solidarity*, p. 165.

III)CAPITALISM, IDENTITIES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Habermas has concerned himself with sociological theory above all in order to deliver a renewed critical approach to the analysis of contemporary society. To a considerable extent, therefore, his main interlocutor is still Marx. Weber plays a central role as well, since he brought to the fore the aporias of a rationalisation of society that seems to reduce, instead of increasing, the scope of freedom. This idea was subsequently borrowed by Lukács and the Frankfurt School. Habermas insists that their concept of rationalisation, basically instrumental, was too narrow. Those two logics of rationalisation, communicative and instrumental, widen the reach of the discussion, whereby he could show an unbalanced process in the course of which the life-world comes under the grips of systemic cognitive-purposive logics.⁶⁶ Collectivities are not granted much space in Habermas' discussion, which moves basically along the axes of two rationalities, related to active individuals and inert life-worlds and systems. But we can see another way of looking at the problem - despite its *ad hoc* emergence - in his own writings:

the imperatives of the subsystems which have become autonomous penetrate, as soon as their ideological veil is taken off, the life-world **from the outside** - as colonial Lords (*Herren*) in a tribal society - and force it into assimilation; but

⁶⁶Idem, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 209, 259-61 and 485; B. II, p. 447.

the fragmented perspectives of the native culture cannot be further coordinated in a way that the play of the metropolis and the world market could be made transparent.⁶⁷

It is as though the pristine situation had been inverted: in the place of encompassing life-worlds with systems appended to them, we are threatened now by overgrown systems that harass regional forms of life. Habermas wants to phrase a diagnosis of this situation without recourse to social groups, classes or state elites, holding fast to a description of life-worlds and systems as **passive** entities. Systems "colonise" the life-world, but this is seen by Habermas exclusively as the mutual, if basically unilateral, effect of two **conditioning causalities**.

Habermas comes very close to facing issues related to collectivities, but falls short of actually taking them up. He criticises Marx for having discerned nothing else than the phantasmagoric, mystified relation between classes in market structures, whereas these structures would have, in fact, introduced a capital mechanism of coordination in complex societies, beyond the "fetishism of the commodity". Moreover, class contradictions have been displaced, or at least dammed up, by the Welfare-State in late capitalism.⁶⁸ Although he comes close to Weber's expression - *Herrschaft* - in the passage cited above, Habermas refrains as well from clearly adopting the view of a rational-legal, bureaucratic form of **domination**.

⁶⁷Idem, *Ibid.*, B. II, p. 522.

⁶⁸Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 488-503 and 512ff.

His depersonification of "systems" has is revealed for its shortcomings and the political struggles and alternatives to the political system one might expect to find in his work disappear from sight.⁶⁹ Rather than class struggles or political upheavals, we should look for the "pathologies" of the life-world - whereby personalities are damaged and socialisation and cultural reproduction, which cannot be replaced by systemic surrogates, are endangered. This analysis would bring out that process of colonisation and its possible counter-tendencies.⁷⁰ We should at last give up Marx's wishful return to a non-severed totality through overcoming the division of society into classes, since the "reification" introduced by the market and state administration cannot entirely be surpassed by means of a return to a romanticised past and to an unfettered and spontaneous life-world.⁷¹

To be sure, his criticisms of Marx are sometimes warranted, as in the case of market relations, which most Marxists today would regard as inevitably persisting in any foreseeable future society. They are, nevertheless, overstated with respect to other themes, in particular when Habermas imputes to him a view of a moral totality in communism without tensions, contradictions and differentiation, or the inability of distinguishing between the modernisation and

⁶⁹T. McCarthy, "Complexity and Democracy: or the Seductions of Systems Theory", in A. Honneth and H. Joas, eds., *op. cit.*, pp. 128 and 131ff. However, for discussions on alternatives and interstitial public spheres as a form of counteracting the colonisation of the life-world and re-introducing reflection in daily life, see his interviews in *Autonomy and Solidarity* and the recent, *Fakzität und Geltung*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1992.

⁷⁰J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, p. 576.

⁷¹Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 501-3.

the colonisation of the life-world. I shall not undertake an analysis of Marx's own view, which is both sympathetic and critical of "modernity", suffice it to say that what is at stake in his own writings is not a morality that would cancel heterogeneity within totalities. Habermas himself addressed the legitimacy claims of norms which, not originating in sectional interests, could become truly, and not ideologically, universalised.⁷² It is indubitable that it is necessary to "...weaken the claims about totalities...".⁷³ It is Habermas' own definition of life-worlds and their cultural structures as homogeneous totalities that in part precludes a proper definition of this issue, so much does he seem to be caught up within a Kantian notion of totality, wherein a uniform universality is simultaneously opposed and directly linked to individual agents.

The lack of meditation on collective subjectivities is also of consequence regarding his conception of collective identity. This issue links up with his view of the structures of the life-world, the so-called "principles" of organisation, and the part performed by social movements in the shaping of historical evolution. Individual identity was, in Habermas' first reflections, already connected to the position of individuals in collectivities. Personal pronouns - I and we, associated with membership in a group which distinguishes itself from strangers (*Fremdegruppe*) - are in this sense important points of reference to the construction of the identity of individuals.⁷⁴ As his understanding of life-worlds brought out their plural character, he begun to

⁷²Idem, *Legitimationsprobleme in Spätkapitalismus*, pp. 153-6.

⁷³Idem, "Questions and Counterquestions", p. 216.

⁷⁴Idem, "Notizen zum Begriff der Rollenkompetenz", pp. 222-3.

suspect that collectivities might also have their identities defined in relation to other groups - as we have seen in the first section of this chapter. But he does not break through the traditional conception of the self-sufficient subject within the life-world and fails to grasp the unavoidable interactive dimension of collectivities and their mutual causal impact. As he says,

...the expression "I" can be used as a means for self-identification: but the self-identification of an I demands intersubjective recognition through another I. Conversely, the self-identification of a group is not assigned through recognition by another group.⁷⁵

The construction of the identity of a group could, therefore, be achieved with reference to its members alone, constituting a "we" in isolation from other collectivities.

Drawing upon Piaget and Kohlberg, Habermas argues that these identities are in unison with world images or interpretations which evolve through history towards more reflexivity and universality. Societies undergo "learning processes" both in this cognitive and moral level and in their capacity to

⁷⁵Idem, "Einleitung: Historischen Materialismus und the Entwicklung normativen Strukturen", p. 22. Somewhat incongruously, Habermas relates identities directly to systems and their potential disruption. His functionalist compatriot, despite his conviction that systems are self-referential, handled the theme of the construction of their identity in relational terms, through the idea of "observers that observe themselves observing". See N. Luhmann, "Identität: was oder wie", in *Soziologische Aufklärung 5*, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990.

manipulate of nature.⁷⁶ Social movements have minor importance in the definition of such images, interpretations and identities. It is not that they do not pervade Habermas' reasoning and concerns. On the contrary, the problem is that they are reduced to agencies which do nothing but actuate the cognitive and moral potential already present in those images and identities. He goes as far as to say that groups can "indicate" (*anzeigen*), but not "explain" the building of an "innovative potential".⁷⁷ Minority groups, such as Protestant sects and, unsuccessfully hitherto, socialist movements, introduce and diffuse evolutionary innovations in the whole of society - which, he underscores, must not be conceived of after the idea of the species as a totalising subject (*Gesamtsubjekt*). How these innovations are produced is something of little curiosity to Habermas, apart from suggestions that evolutionarily problems are thrown up by the material "basis" of society, which must then be solved in other spheres.⁷⁸ This lies perhaps at the core of the rigid separation he proposes between the theory of evolution and the (narrative) discipline of history, wherein the influence of sociology has lent prominence to "collective actors" - which act only in a "figurative" sense.⁷⁹ Whatever the political

⁷⁶Idem, "Einleitung: Historischen Materialismus und the Entwicklung normativen Strukturen", pp. 16ff; *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 72ff. See also his "Können komplexe Gesellschaft eine vernünftige Identität ausbilden?", in *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*.

⁷⁷Idem, "Geschichte und Evolution" (1986), in *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*, p. 231.

⁷⁸Idem, "Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus", pp. 154 and 158; *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, pp. 463-4.

⁷⁹Idem, "Geschichte und Evolution", pp. 201-10. To start with because they address the same object, such a clear-cut boundary was found wanting by T.

validity of such an assessment, his qualms about contemporary social movements stem from that separation as well, insofar as they do not put forward new "principles of organisation" and look backwards, against growth, rather than to the future. The sole exception to this would be the feminist movement - a contention that could be debated, since the exclusion of tradition as a reference in this case underpins his assessment, but by no means that movement as a whole.⁸⁰ A more contingent approach to evolution and change in contemporary society, centred in part on collective subjectivities in general instead of the unfolding of logics of rationality, might pay off as a reappraisal of the problem.

His perception of the construction of a more effective contemporary European identity shares the same limitations. He speaks only of universal moral patterns and of the co-habitation, **within** Europe, of culturally distinct life-worlds,⁸¹ probably bearing in mind situations such as the one endured by Turks in Germany. Neither how they shape each other as concrete forms of life nor how political groups are operating in order to bring about the European Community is touched upon. The same obtains as for the inclusion of Europe in the global system, for it has always shaped its identity in interaction with other geo-political areas and civilisations. In fact, Habermas clings to a very

McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, pp. 268-9.

⁸⁰J. Habermas, *Theories des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, pp. 576ff. See also, for his appraisal of contemporary social movements, "The New Obscurity: the Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies" (1984), in *The New Conservatism*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985.

⁸¹Idem, "Staatbürgerschaft und nationale Identität" (1990), in *Faktizität und Geltung*.

traditional concept of society, enclosed in the boundaries of the nation-state, scarcely paying attention to international or transnational phenomena.⁸²

The ultimate basis of Habermas' fixation on an opposition between reflexive action and instrumentally steered systems, which is accompanied by a substantive notion of structure, may have originally arisen from his underlying notions of causality. These exhibit a strong Kantian bias and untempered allegiance to the modern conceptions of active and conditioning causality. He had opposed motives to causes, in the forthright intonation of neo-Kantian German philosophy: the former would be a unique possession of reflexive social actors, not allowing for nomological knowledge. "Why" explanations, applying to human intentional action, would be sharply dissimilar to causal explanations.⁸³ Less plausibly and with an even stronger Kantian accent, he declared too that "objects of the type of moving bodies" are to be grappled with in instrumental action, whereas in interaction we must deal with "objects of the type of speaking and acting subjects".⁸⁴ He appears to have backed off from this position, since he has more recently suggested that corporal (physico-causal or semantic-physical) movements are elements of action, but not action proper. At the same time, functionalist and structuralist styles of explanation are introduced. Only after their relevance had been

⁸²Johann P. Arnason, "Modernity as Project and as Field of Tensions", in A. Honneth and H. Joas, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁸³Idem, "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", pp. 131 and 314ff. Elsewhere, nevertheless, he acknowledges that to narrate is already to explain. See his "Geschichte und Evolution", p. 213.

⁸⁴Idem, "Einleitung zur Neuausgabe", p. 15.

delineated, could we address the significance of social movements in a particular circumstance. The relation between structure and event, the analyses of which he gives up however, should be regarded as central.⁸⁵ To an extent, all sorts of action in his typology emerge now as dependent upon "why" reasons, upon motives and their hermeneutic deciphering. Alongside this distinctive phrasing of active causality, two varieties of conditioning causality are maintained, one of them utterly detached from the actors' intentions, the other one hinging on a sort of functionalist reasoning which by no means provides grounds for its own acceptance. The rationale for regarding economic and political (administrative) systems as functionally integrated is something never spelled out.

Habermas misses the opportunity to give consequence to insights he has occasionally developed into collective subjectivity and collective causality when he hinted at the relational aspect of the constitution of their identity. How and to what extent his ideas on causality traverse the division between the life-world and systems is not at all clear. They seem to simply duplicate the dualisms found throughout Habermas' work. That they correspond to the downplay of collective subjectivity and its transformation into a **residual category** is a conclusion that seems fairly warranted. Organisations, social movements, the unrestricted array of collectivities that enmesh social life, are not given due importance in Habermas' theory. I do not wish to belittle the achievements of his far-reaching reworking of critical theory, undertaken in order to equip it to tackle the challenges of contemporary society. Together

⁸⁵Idem, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, p. 145; B. II, p. 465.

with distinctive and far-reaching propositions and conceptualisations, he throws up ideas which, even when debatable or imprecise, are extremely suggestive. In some instances, however, they obscure important aspects of social life, especially his claim that his conceptualisations are capable of integrating the notion of class struggle.⁸⁶ Marx's concept of collective subjectivity exhibits facets that remain hidden in Habermas' appraisal.

⁸⁶Idem, "Zur Theorienvergleich in der Soziologie: am Beispiel der Evolutionstheorie" (1974), in *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*, p. 139.

PART TWO

TWO CONCEPTS OF COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY

CHAPTER FOUR

MARX: THE CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

AND THE SOCIAL CLASSES

I) INTERACTION AND DIALECTICS

Karl Marx developed some of the main alternatives to the presuppositional universe of bourgeois ideology to which the sociological tradition is heir. He gave pride of place to the notion of interaction and stressed the dialectics between subject and object, their mutual constitution; he also made paramount a concept that was an even greater break away from that presuppositional core - the concept of social class. His approach, in its very essence, was for this reason a challenge to bourgeois ideologies, penetrating levels of social reality made opaque by the routines of capitalist social formations.

The most famous and explicit assertion of the dialectics between subject and object is found in the concise "Theses on Feuerbach", wherein he stated the limitations of a materialism that places everything on the object (*der Gegenstand*). Only idealism had given the due attention to the active side of the relationship, that is had understood the role of the subject in the constitution of social reality. Humans are not the passive product of the workings of blind social conditions: to a certain extent they have the power to direct the evolution of history. From this derives the bold, although exaggerated statement which demands that intellectuals should mobilise to change the world, not just interpret it as Feuerbach was prone to do.¹

¹K. Marx, "Thesen über Feuerbach" (1845), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, B. 3, Berlin, Dietz, 1958, pp. 5ff. The proclamation that men make their own history, even though in conditions they cannot choose, shares the same ground. See K. Marx, *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon* (1852), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, B. 8, Berlin, Dietz, 1960, p. 115.

By the same token, Marx expressed one of his recurrent critiques of bourgeois individualism, underscoring the idea of interaction - or **social relations**. Against Feuerbach, he put forward the view of "human society" or "socialised humanity". Feuerbach's formulation, that attributed an internal essence to each individual, of which the species (*die Gattung*) consisted, was unacceptable. Instead, human "essence" was seen as comprising the whole of social relations, in their historicity. The "generality" (*die Allgemeinheit*) of the species arises not from a platonic human essence, regardless of its materialistic phrasing, but from the contingent and ever-changing reality brought about by social interaction.² Their very existence and experiencing of relations (*Verhalten*) is what distinguishes humans from the broader animal realm. Language, in this interactive dimension, was bestowed great significance, associated with consciousness. Both language and individual consciousness are eminently social, emerging in the course and as a consequence of the necessities inherent to human relationships.³ We may, therefore, agree with the late Lukács' suggestion that Marx reshaped the classical notion of **substance** in Western philosophy, which he later expressed scientifically in *Capital*.⁴ These are very synthetical statements as to Marx's positions, which are repeated throughout his work, linked to different themes.

²Idem, "Thesen über Feuerbach".

³ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (1845/6), in Idem, *Werke*, B. 3, p. 30.

⁴G. Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, I. Halbband, in *Werke*, B. 13, Darmstadt/ Neuwied, 1984, pp. 613ff.

One, if not the crucial issue coupled to this attack on the polarisation between individual and society, was yielded by the problematic of **labour**. Since his first writings, Marx placed a strong emphasis on the objectification of men in their relationship with nature, such that it is the act of production that makes humans human - and furnishes the basis of social relations between individuals. Of course, these relations vary according to the historical conditions that prevail at any given moment. Under alienated work conditions, instead of freely realising their effective being, "men" become estranged from both their individual and species' lives: the latter would become just a means for the former, in which self-satisfaction was already ruled out. Men stand, thus, as a power opposed to other men in their condition as workers, placing them in their service as **things**, under domination and coercion.⁵ Communism was envisaged, at this stage, as the overcoming of human alienation.

Some political ideas Marx sketched during this period, under the clear influence of Rousseau, are closely connected to this abstract philosophical perspective. In bourgeois society, individuals suffer a schizophrenic division of their selves. In the state, they live the life of the species; their individual economic life lies, on the other hand, outside this sphere. There is a bifurcated existence: as universal beings, in the political community, and as private

⁵K. Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, Ergänzungsband, Ersterteil, Berlin, Dietz, 1968, especially pp. 516-9 and 574-8. Marx oscillates, though, over the precise connections between individual and society. Although he praised Feuerbach for bringing social relations to the centre of his critique of Hegel's dialectics in the later sections of these tentative notes (p. 570), he had earlier advanced propositions that were at variance with this idea, assuming a more abstract and platonic perspective on the nexus between these two poles (pp. 538-9).

persons, in bourgeois civil society.⁶ Marx retained the main elements of this postulation until the end of his intellectual and political career.⁷ They were reshaped, under the influence of Saint-Simon and Blanqui, with the introduction of the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and the confidence in the withering away of the state. Once the individual and the species were reconciled, and no antagonistic class interests remained, the "administration" of things would replace political power. This constitutes one of the major weaknesses of Marxist socialism, but it has little to do with the syllogistic relations we shall shortly examine in detail.

Those core reflections of Marx's historical materialism faded into the background in his mature analysis of the capitalist mode of production. They remained, however, as important as before. Well known are his ironic assertions about the fairy tales of the individual economic man, as portrayed for example in the story of Robinson Crusoe. The capitalist market, having facilitated a decisive stride towards human individuation, has, nonetheless, the faculty of hiding the very pre-conditions for the existence and development of this individuality, cloaking the social relations in which it is primarily embedded. The operations of the market and the "fetishism of the commodity" transform the relations between men into relations between things, the products of work. During the Middle Ages, however, the social relations of people in

⁶Idem, *Zur Juden Frage* (1844), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, B. 1, pp. 354-5.

⁷They turn up again in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifest des kommunistischen Partei* (1848), in *Werke*, B. 4, Berlin, Dietz, 1939., p. 482; see also, in particular, K. Marx, *Kritik des Gothaer Programms* (1875), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, B. 19, Berlin, Dietz, 1962.

their work processes did not have their content disguised. This was so because in that period humans still lived under the "natural relations of the species": these conditions were destroyed by the growth of the pure economic coercion of the market. This, according to Marx's project and hopes, should in turn give way to the "free association" of these already individualised men, with the institution of communism.⁸

There are problems with this, and Habermas' misgivings (see chap. 3.III) have some justification. When carving out his more general and universal categories as for the problematic of the interchange between the human species and the natural world, Marx seems to have partially returned to a narrower conceptualisation of social relations. This occurred in his early as well as in his late writings. In the analytical section of *Capital* on the process of production in general, we are presented with a treatment of the relations between isolated men and nature. As an "eternal natural condition of human life" - and portrayed in its "simple and abstract moments" - that process was seen as **independent** of the social forms it might concretely assume.⁹ Marx was careful to stress that he was not talking about the work process of a historical social formation. He intended to bring out only some analytical categories that allowed for the approach to any particular situation. All the same, this reservation does not suffice, since it is dependent upon essential features of a philosophy of the subject that implies individuals existing and

⁸Idem, *Das Kapital*, B. I, MEGA II-5, pp. 102ff.

⁹K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. I, p. 192. This approach is also prevalent in the *Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*.

expressing themselves independently of others. The theorisation of the working process ought, therefore, to take into account the interactive aspect of social relations at the most abstract level as well.¹⁰

But it must be remembered that even in this later work, basically dedicated to economics and its critique, Marx was keen on highlighting the need for mutual (dialectical) recognition between men in order that they constitute themselves as individuals: only relating to the man Paul as an equal does the man Peter relate to himself as a man, whereby, at the same time, each assumes the form of realisation (*Erscheinungsform*) of the human species.¹¹ More specifically, we are told that a man is a king only insofar as other men behave in a subordinate way as to him.¹² In this sense, however in incompletely, Marx suggested the rudiments of a theory of communicative action. As already stated in the previous chapter, rather than separating the dimensions of labour and culture even more, we should make recourse to the notion of interaction, so prominent in both Marx and Habermas, so as to build a common framework between these two spheres.

¹⁰This sort of problem in fact traverses the whole of chapter one of *Das Kapital*, B. I - with its reliance upon the isolated producer of commodities, although the theory of value depends as such on its intrinsic social character. The issue came to the fore once more when, for instance, Marx tackled the original accumulation of capital and the historical tendency he foresaw of the whole process (chaps. 24-25), with, at both stages, individuals being expropriated by individuals. Nevertheless, there is no reason whatsoever to accept Habermas' narrow characterisation of the labour process as merely oriented by instrumental action. Marx had much more in view - human objectification in its wholeness - when he wrote about the labour process.

¹¹Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 85 (note).

¹²Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 89 (note).

These are the presuppositional elements that led Marx to the propositions which grant an understanding of social life that denies its origins in isolated individuals, in contradistinction to what writers influenced by methodological individualism are wont to believe. Social formations actually express the "sum" of the relations (*Beziehungen* and *Vehältnisse*) in which individuals find themselves entangled with one another - they are hence not slaves or citizens in principle: these are social determinations.¹³ These presuppositions explain, moreover, the figures of speech and the underlying conceptualisation of the introduction to *Capital*, according to which individuals are essentially the embodiment of economic categories and class relations, despite their subjective capacity to stand above the constraining relations they are submitted to.¹⁴ They can choose not to bow to these relations no more than they can prevent the functioning of natural laws. Does Marx thereby deny the role of human reflexivity or, even more seriously, the dialectics with which we started the discussion of his ideas? As we shall see in what follows, he has by no means been ensnared by these pitfalls - at least not in these passages. He just eschewed an individualistic appreciation of social processes. The main features of his alternative are rooted in the two axes dwelled upon hitherto, which are, however, mingled with some other crucial propositions.

¹³Idem, *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, pp. 175-6.

¹⁴Idem, *Das Kapital*, B. I, p. 67.

II)SOCIAL CLASSES AS COLLECTIVE SUBJECTS

In terms of the bourgeois ideological universe, Marx's most powerful challenge was advanced within the concept of social class, and the inexorable struggles between them. If the dialectics between subject and object, plus the notion of social relations, were to be fastened upon by several other sociological trends afterwards, the same did not obtain for the social classes. This concept has ever since been a contentious one in social theory.¹⁵ Some refuse it any validity, or concede to it just the status of a reification, whilst others bring in complementary notions, restricting its relevance.

Instead of the private individuals of bourgeois civil society, we are introduced by Marx to their collective determinations, as business men, land owners and wage workers.¹⁶ It was basically the historical constitution of the modern world that set the horizon for Marx's and Engels' conceptualisation of this social element. Looking back to previous historical stages, their terminology was even somewhat imprecise, since they oscillated over the conceptualisation of the divisions along which society was structured. Early on they clearly discriminated between patriarchalism, slavery, status and class societies.¹⁷ In *The Communist Manifesto*, however, they denounced the history of all societies up to that stage as the history of class struggles, except for the

¹⁵For an overview, consult A. Swingewood, *Marx and Modern Social Theory*, London and Basingtonstoke, Macmillan, 1979 (1975), pp. 119ff.

¹⁶Idem, *Zur Juden Frage*, p. 354.

¹⁷K. Marx and F. Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, p. 22.

phase of primitive societies (reservation later specified), in spite of retaining a lot of their original overview.¹⁸ The culmination of that process and the unfolding of the modern age and the revolutionary development of the bourgeoisie, a class that has built the world according to its image and interests.

The initial stages of growth of the middle classes owe little to an intentional move to a new form of social organisation. We are confronted with a blind process, wherein the subjects of that history hardly exhibited projects. The accumulation of capital, the increasing division of labour, the progressive individuation of men, come about with the force of a spontaneous natural development. Only the city, as an "association", seems to have enjoyed a reflexive attitude, and in a limited sense only, since their inhabitants marshalled efforts to resist feudal pressures, sharing with each other the interest of furthering productive forces, maintaining the corporate system and control over the labourers.¹⁹ The ultimate outcome of this historical evolution meant the unintended emergence of a new order, with the project of the bourgeois classes assuming now a much more consistent outlook.²⁰

¹⁸Idem, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, especially pp. 462-3.

¹⁹Idem, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, pp. 50ff.

²⁰This is in a sense an example of the unintended consequences of intentional behaviour, which, impelling the development of the productive forces, cracked the delicate balance of medieval traditional society, giving birth to capitalism. It has little to do, though, with methodological individualism, contrary to what authors such as Jon Elster (*Making Sense of Marx*, pp. 4ff) would have us believe. It is true that, in a letter, Engels showed that he was perplexed by the random consequences that spring up in history, translating them in terms of non-intended results of the action of individuals - see F. Engels, "Brief an Joseph Bloch" (21/07/1890), in K. Marx and F. Engels,

The bourgeoisie, no longer a mere status position (*Stand*), but a class - since it transcended the local level, taking over the national space, and brought into being a different sort of political institution. The state, separated from society, became the main bulwark of private property and of the ruling classes. It constitutes the means whereby the bourgeoisie assures the prevalence of its interests. The state is the true consciousness of that class and the locus in which the civilisation of a certain period can be grasped in its entirety.²¹ To the emergence of the modern age corresponds, therefore, the constitution of a new type of collective subject, characterised by its sheer class determination, which subordinates everything else to this secularised condition.

The evolution of the working classes showed some similarities with that of the middle classes. In the beginning the proletariat fought against the individual bourgeois, instead of against the less immediate relations of production, manifesting deep hatred even for the instruments of production. At this stage it constituted no more than a disperse (*zerstreut*) and segmented (*zersplittert*) mass, easily and without danger mobilised by the bourgeoisie against its own foes. In the long run, however, this political participation, alongside a practice of economic resistance, contributed to the developing of the working classes' consciousness. From a dependent political participation

Werke, B. 37, Berlin, Dietz, 1967, p. 464. This does not warrant the presumption that Marx and Engels assumed an individualistic methodology. The thrust of their approach was actually very distinct from that.

²¹K. Marx and F. Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, pp. 60-2, and also *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, pp. 466-7.

and timid "coalitions" at the local level, the proletariat ascended to the national political sphere, becoming properly constituted as a social class.²²

Nonetheless, this is a fragile achievement, for the concurrence in the market recurrently sets in motion a tendency towards division and opposition between individual workers, renewing the sources of dispersion within the class. This chronic process, contravened by the interest and necessity of the workers in the organisation of their coalitions, evinces an essential aspect of Marx's concept of class: it is always a **movement**, not a structural-economic determination alone. On the other hand, it attains different degrees of realisation, for its levels of consciousness and self-constitution cannot be taken for granted. There is when the notions of "class in itself" and "class for itself" intervene: whereas the domination of capital creates "common interests" in the proletariat, whereby it is already a class *vis-à-vis* this external determination, it is in practice with the construction of a shared identity that the working class achieves political maturity and is properly constituted as a class.²³

Thus far, we have dealt with Marx's view of the social classes basically in substantive terms. The last questions lend, however, a new inflection to our discussion, demanding a more precise definition of the **concept** of social class. It is curious to notice that Marx did not occupy himself enough with this problem, not even in *Capital*, for, as is well known, he left unfinished the

²²Idem, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, pp. 470-1.

²³K. Marx, *Misère de la Philosophie* (1847), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Oeuvres*, v. 1, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 135. For the competition and collaboration between workers, consult also K. Marx and F. Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, p. 61, and *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, p. 474.

chapter that would grapple with it.²⁴ Provisionally, let me say that he stated the concept in connection with the *relations* - interactions - within and between social groups and that it furnished a new causal principle, i.e. a collective causality. Before endeavouring to derive a more precise answer from his writings, I shall examine a background element to his conceptual proposition, which underpinned, usually without warning, the whole of his substantive propositions. I shall thereby start to substantiate my divergency with Habermas in relation to what he considers to be the idealism and the hang-ups of the philosophy of consciousness still central in Marx's conception of collective subjectivity.

Marx's concept of social class has an important predecessor in Hegel's universal bureaucracy.²⁵ Hegel was the first to place the relationship of the general (*das Allgemeine*), the particular (*das Besondere*) and the singular (*das Einzelne*) in the centre of his logic. Despite a strong tendency towards formalism, abstract totalisation and sophistry, he accomplished an important advance, especially because he handled this apparently exclusively logical issue as a problem of the "structure" and development of society.²⁶ This strand of reflection had widespread consequences, for as Jay concludes:

²⁴K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. III (1894), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, B. 25, Berlin, Dietz, 1964, pp. 892-3.

²⁵Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 57.

²⁶G. Lukács, *Über die Besonderheit als Kategorie der Ästhetik*, in *Werke*, B. 10, p. 604. See also A. Swingewood, *Marx and Modern Social Theory*, pp. 33-50.

This acceptance of what we have called 'latitudinal totalities' meant that any part in a larger whole might itself be considered from its internal dynamics. Thus reality for Hegel was populated by multitudes of hierarchally linked or horizontally juxtaposed totalities, which defied comprehension through reduction to their component parts.²⁷

If for the idealist philosopher, rather absurdly, the bureaucracy of the Prussian state embodied the principle of universal reason, overcoming the irrationality of civil society, the working classes crept into Marx's standpoint also to play the role of carriers of the necessary rational unfolding of a certain historical period. This idea appears to have struck Marx at first (discounting his former discussion on wood and property in the newspaper he directed in his youth) in relation to Germany's backwardness in the heart of Europe: if the limited and egoistic bourgeoisie of his country was unable to break through the still feudal conditions of its society, the proletariat would have to assume the responsibility for pushing this process through. In so doing, however, it would bring about a much wider change, since it had to go past capitalism, according to its own objective interests, which Marx, in a Kantian tenor, merged with philosophy's rational categorical imperative.²⁸ The proletariat which was nothing could become all, and in freeing itself would free the whole of society,

²⁷M. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, p. 59.

²⁸K. Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung" (1844), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, B. 1, Berlin, Dietz, 1956, pp. 389-91.

changing social conditions to the point of its own dissolution; it had nothing to lose, but its chains, historical possibility and necessity opened up by the development of the productive forces under capitalism.²⁹

The relations between social classes substantiated for Marx those syllogistic relations, and by means of this conceptualisation he avoided a reification of society as well as brushing aside a nominalistic approach. The syllogism was the instrument he embraced in order to criticise the individualistic fictions of bourgeois ideology, without compromises with the Romantics' substantialist and affirmative organicism, already only partially absorbed by Hegel. In this context,

the dialectics of the general and the particular play an important role, whereby the particular is exactly the logical expression of the categories of social mediation between individual men and society.³⁰

²⁹K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, pp. 467, 472-3 and 492-3.

³⁰G. Lukács, *Über die Besonderheit als Kategorie der Ästhetik*, p. 613. That Lukács learned from this often unexplicit problematic in Marx's work is evident from the very beginning of his materialist production, as is apparent in Idem, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (1923), in *Werke*, B. 2, Neuwied/Berlin, Luchterhand, 1968. Notwithstanding the troublesome identification of subject and object that is drawn in that piece, it is difficult to see how M. Jay (*Marxism and Totality*, chap. 2) can see Lukács as a "holist". If we stress the fact that the categories expounded by Lukács are known by Jay (pp. 302-3), his conclusion sounds even more bewildering. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, syllogism is the "form or instrument of reasoning from generals to particulars". I make use of the term in the broad sense Hegel attributed to it, implying the relations between elements within a logical or social totality.

The syllogism, in its Marxist and Luckacsian version, allows, therefore, for the understanding of social life beyond abstract individualisms and abstract "holisms". **Social relations**, shaping classes, mediate between these two poles; this is, moreover, the way in which the dialectics between subject and object concretely operates, since the idea of an immediate impact of individuals upon "society" and vice versa is untenable, for collective subjectivities mediate between them. However, contrary to Habermas' indictments, such dialectics of the general, the particular and the singular does not lead to idealism, insofar as social relations receive due attention. Instead of a Kantian, idealist notion of totality, abstractly conceived and directly linked to individuals, the presence of collectivities enmeshed in social life embeds and articulates those two poles. Individuals cannot be abstractly reduced to themselves nor can collectivities be seen as independent from them and the social systems that possess the properties which shape these collectivities in their specificity.

Marx's syllogism provides a further insight, though. It brings out the hierarchised character of social life and the ideologies that mask these hierarchies. In capitalist societies, the bourgeoisie appears as universal in its values and pretensions because it has the capacity to, at the same time, shape social life and disguise its own domination. Structuring social relations in a particular form, it obscures the unequal distribution of power and resources, although this should not be seen as a machiavellian or clearly intentional process, since it comes about in part as the unintended consequence of the behaviour of its members and sections, or because the social relations which make the bourgeoisie what it is are often obscure for the individual bourgeois.

Society, in its generality, and capital are one and the same thing. At the same time, as we will see below, capital should be directly identified with the bourgeoisie. The proletariat, however, is capital too, sucked, as it is, into the workings of the system, as an element without which it could not exist. Both are particulars, but the bourgeoisie, directly identified with capital, looks forward to shaping the totality of social life and aspires to universality, which remains ideological, though, insofar as this aspiration rests upon the masking of social inequalities and of its own particularity. The proletariat, on the other hand, affirms itself against the universality of capital. In its irreducible particularity, which resists assimilation by the generality of capital, it brings forward the possibility of another universality, one in which antagonistic social relations would not be present. To be sure, owing as it did, a lot to Cartesianism, Marx's concept of the actor suggested a socialist transition and a communist society wherein the state, as an encompassing and universal collectivity, would unify the whole of social particularities and would make society transparent to itself through the identification of, and planning in response to, the **general interest**.³¹ If this is an idea that should be abandoned, we should not overlook Marx's main argument and the hopes he derived from the identification of the false and ideological universality which obtains under the hierarchised generality of capital and its overthrow. It is possible to grasp the **concrete universality** of social life only insofar as we

³¹See Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism Revisited*, London, Harper Collins, 1991, chap. 1.

identify the particulars which are its part and product, in their hierarchical relations.

Having reached this point we need, however, to take on more directly the problems raised by methodological individualism. So far, so good, they might say. Marx did introduce levels of mediation and pointed to the "totality" of social life. But what then, if one still maintains that society and social classes may and must be reduced to their component parts, not just as an analytical breaking down of an organic whole into its parts, but as the unveiling of its substantial units, which, by means of addition, bring into being entities that have no other reality beyond that constituted by those isolated elements? The answer to this generally speaking is that Marx did not advance a polished response to the question. We can find, however, some indications in his work, from which, together with the two presuppositional advances reviewed at the beginning of this chapter, we will be able to proceed towards the definition of a theory of collective subjectivity. On the other hand, it is necessary to stress that it was precisely the syllogism and its tacit articulation with the notion of interaction and with dialectics that prevented Marx from adopting a homogeneous view of totality when he rejected individualism. Thereby the collective subjectivities he depicted, contrary to Habermas' belief, were merely intersubjectively constituted collectivities, rather than substantial macro-subjects. Marx managed to avoid the split that obtains in bourgeois consciousness, in contrast to much of contemporary sociological theory, including much of Critical Theory.

III) PROPERTIES, STRUCTURE AND ACTION

The initial point to establish is Marx's agreement with some aspects of the organicism which Hegel and the French socialists inherited respectively from the Romantics and from the beginnings of positivism - although he completely departed company with them in regard to the latter's affirmative use of this notion to lay claims related to the intrinsically good character of social differentiation and hierarchisation.³² His major work is full of suggestions regarding this totalist approach. Society - a **totality** - was, for instance, conceived as an **organism** in permanent process of change.³³ Especially instructive are the ideas he cultivated in relation to the themes of cooperation and the manufacture. The former originates a new productive power, greater than the simple sum of the productive capacity of individual workers, whereas the latter creates the "collective worker" (*das Gesamtarbeiter*), with power and characteristics distinct from the individual worker, who is coercively transformed into a part of a machine.³⁴ In one passage Marx even hints at a term that might well characterise the sort of collective causality I have been trying to outline:

As the power of attack of a squadron of cavalry or the power of resistance of an infantry regiment is essentially distinct from

³²M. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, pp. 27-8.

³³K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. 1, p. 68.

³⁴Idem, *Ibid.*, respectively pp. 323 and 366, in particular.

the sum of the power of attack and resistance those knights and soldiers develop individually, so the pure sum of the power of the individualised worker is distinct from the social power developed when several hands act together (*zusammenwirken*) at the same time carrying out the same operation.³⁵

New ground was broken therein, for his alternative to passive-inert social systems was not an anthropomorphic concept of action; although relatively oblivious to itself, a new conceptualisation crept in: Marx clearly perceived that the efficacy of social systems cannot be rendered by the traditional notions of active and conditioning causality. The notion of **properties** of social systems, which we had occasion to meet in the course of our discussion of Giddens' structuration theory, is once more present. According to these passages, Marx supported an idea of social phenomena wherein an atomistic conceptualisation of social reality has no place, for the systems mentioned above cannot be reduced to their individual components. This includes, of course, their collective causality, which is closely connected to social relations. There is, thus, a *sui generis* reality in social phenomena, which cannot, however, be detached from the relations between individuals and between collective subjectivities.³⁶

³⁵Idem, Ibid., p. 263. In German, *zusammenwirken* means both to cooperate and to exert a joint action.

³⁶I therefore in part agree and in part disagree with Anthony Woodiwiss, *Social Theory after Postmodernism*, London/ Winchester, Pluto, 1990, p. 25.

But Marx went further and established two different ways whereby the properties of social systems come about. On the one hand, especially but not only, often in the "persona" which capitalists and land owners incarnate, there is an internal motivation that drives some individuals according to the values of the capitalist world - the fetishism of the commodity and its correlate internalisation provide for the substantiation of this tendency; on the other hand, nevertheless, and this is recurrently true as for the working classes, the sheer coercion of the market produces these properties. This certainly affects the ruling classes also, since they cannot evade the limiting conditions posed by the mercantile relations they have to confront. The pressure these relations exert on the proletariat are, nonetheless, even stronger. Unable to elude the "freedom" to sell their labour force in the market, workers can only partially dodge the despotism of the capitalist that reigns in the factory - even though the bourgeoisie denounces cynically the socialist project as the institution of tyranny over society as a whole.³⁷ I do not want to imply by these ideas - which were perhaps more forceful in his early writings, in terms of motivational drives - that Marx had a really multidimensional notion of "social action"; they point to ideas found scattered throughout his reflections, nonetheless, in connection with the structuring of social systems. A pure

³⁷K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. I, pp. 102ff and 349-1. See also K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, passim. If the general motivational set of individuals and classes stems from this socio-economic situation, we have an explanation for their trying to secure, in all spheres, the interests thereby yielded (as we see in the last cited text, p. 479). For a further view, with a general "systematicity" for social systems being brought about through coercion (or without it), see F. Engels, "Von der Autorität" (1874), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, B. 18, Berlin, Dietz, 1962.

division of system and life-world is, therefore, untenable in his writings, in which, irrespective of the materialist concentration on economic interests instrumentally pursued, power and culture play an essential role - let alone the theme of alienation, which highlights the manifold features of human personality.

Having said that, it is important to fasten upon the connections between these properties and the dialectics between subject and object plus the notion of interaction. The contention I want to sustain is that these are actually the elements that ground Marx's notion of social properties, despite the fact that he hardly paid attention to its more general relevance. What, therefore, constitutes the peculiar properties of manufactures and collective workers, but a certain organisation of the interactive setting? Why is language, and even individual consciousness, a social product, developed through the interchange between human beings in society, as pointed out above? How is the political system structured, if not around the contradictory relations between the social classes? Finally, what is the mysterious meaning of surplus-value, if not the appropriation of the results of the work of one class by another, basically a collective social relation?³⁸ It is the crucial idea of relations between the social classes that set Marx's conception far beyond a mere statistical or ecological approach.

This is valid for the absolute surplus-value as much as for the relative surplus-value, which is exactly an outcome of the struggle between capitalists and workers. Whilst capitalists want to guarantee their right to make the most

³⁸K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. I, pp. 198ff.

use of the labour force possible, as commodity purchased, workers strive for its limitation. Therefore,

...the history of capitalist production appears as the normalisation of the working day as a struggle around its limitation - a struggle between the collective capitalist (*Gesammtkapitalisten*), that is the capitalist class, and the collective worker (*Gesammtarbeiter*) or the working class.³⁹

This is how Marx described the whole history of the emergence of relative surplus-value, intended to compensate, through dead labour, the shortening of capital's living part. With this we are offered a statement on the relation between the classes and the structuring impact they exert on the social system in its encompassing dimension.

This is a feature we perceive in other Marxian texts, alongside a looser description of the relations *within* each class. The tone is quite debatable, as is the underlying hypothesis; despite this, the point is clear in his reflections on the role of the peasantry during the revolutions of mid-nineteenth century France. The text is famous, amongst other reasons, for its description of the amorphous character of the peasantry, which is compared to a sack of potatoes. Their dispersion across an agrarian space where communications were restricted posed severe limits to their constitution as a class: on the one hand, the very economic conditions of existence made them involuntarily a class; on

³⁹Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 241.

the other, their isolation, preventing any association or political organisation, made impossible their full constitution as a class. Once again Marx summoned the problematic of the "class in itself" and the "class for itself". The peasantry, in contrast to the proletariat, was seen as inexorably stopping at the first stage, relying in the end upon Bonaparte in order to have its demands met.⁴⁰ I have already drawn attention to Marx's theses of the working class and the unstable relation between competition and collaboration that obtains within it, plus the vicissitudes this entails to its full constitution as a class. Notwithstanding the important stride forward, there are many complications therein.

The most conspicuous is produced by Marx's straight identification between social movement and class constitution. He actually tended to blur the distinction between the two concepts, with resulting theoretical and political negative side effects.⁴¹ The problem, which we can just allude to for the moment, is that Marx uncritically adopted a great deal of the core notion of the philosophy of the subject, whose main aspects we have seen in the foregoing pages, that the constitution of one's identity and consciousness is founded on the centring, usually in a reflexive way, of one's ego. That is precisely what loomed large in Marx's model, even when he endeavoured to achieve a radical break with individualism. A social class would, thus, be fully constituted inasmuch as it could become a "class for itself". The dialectics inherited from

⁴⁰K. Marx, *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, p. 199.

⁴¹They can be largely referred to a too immediate identification between socialist parties and the working classes, with the loss of specificity of the political level. For his programme in connection with this, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848/1875*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975, pp. 108ff.

Hegel held negative sway in this sense, for they implied a constitution of identity - individual and collective - that meant precisely, through the utilisation and overcoming of contradictions, the increasing control and clarification of one's consciousness. This would be reflected in the constitution of the proletariat and in the development of humanity globally considered, as a process of civilisation.⁴²

Inadvertently, Marx partially adopted a formulation that harks back to a conception the premises of which he did not share. His confidence in the widening of human reason, which was somehow associated with the development of productive forces⁴³, placed him in a trap. And yet he was not altogether caught by it, for more subtle and divergent ideas related to class constitution were present in his work. First of all, the passage from "class in itself" to "class for itself" included the notions both of dialectics and of interaction. Hegel's Jena period Spirit, discussed by Habermas (chap. 3.I), was somehow duplicated by Marx. There is no class constitution except in connection with exploitation and struggle, which, as seen above, proceeds from basic revolt, through economic coalitions, to political organisation. Furthermore, because of its very position in the process of production, the bourgeoisie has only limited possibility of achieving consciousness of its

⁴²R. Bodei, "Strategie di Individuazione", *Aut-Aut*, v. 32, 1985, pp. 94-8.

⁴³See, for instance, K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, p. 465 - wherein they linked the necessity of a rational collective approach to the future to the mutability brought about by the bourgeois revolution.

historical situation, as Lukács later underscored.⁴⁴ Power, interests, identity constitution, local cultures, communication, are elements always present in Marx's more concrete descriptions of bourgeois and working class social and political life.

Although only sketched, Marx moreover suggested a crucial alternative, which places us on the path to overcome the fixation of sociology with the poles of passive and conditioning causality.

According to Perry Anderson,⁴⁵ Marx was never able to choose effectively between two explicative logics and causal principles, which took turns at each stage of his intellectual evolution. One is found in the class struggles of *The Communist Manifesto*; the other is displayed in the "structures" of his 1859 introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, with its fixation upon the interplay between forces and relations of production, which, at certain stages of development, enter in mutual contradiction.⁴⁶ Giddens is, in practice, of the same opinion, and rephrases that disjunction. After an interesting and precise analysis of Marx's texts he refutes the belief that Marx was keen on making a differentiated use of terms such as contradiction (*Widerspruch*), antagonism (*Gegensatz*), conflict (*Konflikt*) and struggle (*Kampf*) - although struggle was used more

⁴⁴G. Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*. This insight does not warrant, of course, his identification of subject and object with respect to the proletariat.

⁴⁵P. Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, pp. 33-4.

⁴⁶K. Marx, *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (1859), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, B. 13, Berlin, Dietz, 1961, pp. 8ff.

conclusively to imply actors. He appeals, from this understanding, for a clear-cut distinction between **conflict** and **contradiction**. Whereas the former would designate struggles between actors or collectivities, the latter would specify the disjunction of structural principles of system organisation.⁴⁷

We may, however, discover a novel solution to Anderson's question which may facilitate the overcoming of the sort of settlement proposed by Giddens, which gives privileged and immutable status to the contraposition between active and conditioning causality, regardless of the collective character of the actors (inconsistently, we must remember) hinted at in his formulation. We will come nearer our goal by taking this step, achieving a deeper definition of the concept of collective causality.

I want to draw attention to Althusser, when he denied that Marx restricted his discussion of the social classes, in *Capital*, to its last chapter. In fact, he says, they cut across the whole book, since all economic processes obtain within social "social relations" which are, in the last instance, the relations and especially the struggles between the classes.⁴⁸ Marx himself had pointed to the fact that the history of the creation of the economic categories of capitalism was part of the phenomenon of the creation of the social classes

⁴⁷A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 131. For an opposed reading, which stresses a supposedly more conscious and differentiated use of these expressions by Marx, consult J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 43, and *Logic and Society*, p. 90; see also J. Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, pp. 44-5.

⁴⁸L. Althusser, "Marxisme et Lutte de Classe" (1970), in *Positions*, pp. 62-3.

under this mode of production.⁴⁹ For this reason, he referred to "capital" as wanting this or that, carrying one or another activity out; it merely constitutes the economic categorial equivalent of the bourgeoisie as a class. This is the reason why he switched back and forth from terms such as wage work and capital to working class and bourgeoisie, and vice versa.⁵⁰ Early on this position was clear, and so were its ties with the concept of totality and the question of social relations:

To be a capitalist means not only to assume a personal position, but a social one in production. Capital is a general social product and can be grasped only through the generality of its several members, that is that in the last instance only through the generality of all society members can it be set in movement.⁵¹

This is also the underlying rationale for the definition of the trinity formula - capital, ground and work - as a reified, though faithful, expression of social

⁴⁹K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. I, pp. 644ff and 681-3.

⁵⁰See especially Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 268-9, and also *Lohn, Preis und Profit* (1865), in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, B. 16, Berlin, Dietz, 1962 - in particular pp. 147ff, wherein he spoke about "the struggle (*Kampf*) between capital and labour and its outcome". All the above mentioned struggles around the working day press home this ontological, as well as methodological, principle, despite its invisible status.

⁵¹K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, p. 475 . As they substantively devised further on (p. 468), "structural" and "actional" terms are interchangeable: "the bourgeoisie, i.e. capital".

relations,⁵² and the justification for the above cited remark on individuals as the "persona" of social relations. It is not that individual action has no place in history, although Marx was resolute on the limits posed by constraining market conditionings. Individual action, either reproducing or changing those relations, in a radical or limited form - as we do see throughout *Capital* - finds real expression within collective movements, for which individual participation is determining. We are in fact presented the dialectics of collective subjectivity, which definitely takes us beyond the enchanted universe of individual inventors of new worlds and utopias.

The riddle of the "method of exposition" of *Capital* can be made out once we bear in mind the line of reasoning proposed above. We have seen in the first chapter that the contraposition between individual and society stands at the core of bourgeois thought; we have had in front of us also the alternatives to that presuppositional universe: the dialectic realisation of the relation between individual and society, the notion of interaction and the notion of collective subjectivity. We can, thus, ask why the commodity is the "elementary form" of the capitalist mode of production, as Marx stated in the first pages of that book.⁵³ The answer might be that the commodity is the *basic cell* of that mode of production because it expresses the relationship between two individuals, its reified configuration notwithstanding; thereby it opens the door to the general understanding of the functioning of the whole

⁵²K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. III, pp. 822ff.

⁵³Idem, *Ibid.*, p.17. For the methodological problems involved in this regard, see the "Nachwort zu zweiten Auflage" to *Das Kapital* (B. I, p. 709) and the 1857 introduction to the *Grundrisse*.

system. Marx unfolded the diverse forms of equivalence until he arrived at its universal form, money, and finally at **surplus-value**, whereby the social classes were dragged into the scene. These are all reified configurations of social relations between individuals and between collective subjectivities. From the more abstract one - commodity - Marx reached out to the classes, aiming at expanding his analysis up to the point wherein he would have considered the state and the world market. The "concrete universal" - the full expression of the relations between collectivities and the international social system of which they are part and product - was his ultimate target.

These considerations press home one of the basic hypothesis of this study, i.e. that social systems should neither be taken as the mere sum of their members nor as passive entities. The concept of collective subjectivity and its counterpart, collective causality, are intended to address problems already in part worked out by Marx, as we can see. Subject and object are, in this perspective, one and the same thing - although one must be wary not to slide into an expressive and undifferentiated view of totality, as tended to be the case with the young Lukács.⁵⁴ The dialectics between social systems is what actually makes true this identification, which is limited though, insofar as they are subject and object in relation to one another. If they exert a causal impact on themselves, by means of their internal differentiation, this just brings out the multilayered aspect of social life. The syllogism of the general, the particular and the singular undertakes to grasp these multifarious interactive

⁵⁴See, for that and the problems thence generated, M. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, chap. 2.

networks and the constitution of several partial **totalities**.⁵⁵ Hence, we have not two, but one general logic, and Anderson's account of the problem discloses the shortcomings of an acceptance of those traditional presuppositional poles, as much as does Giddens' proposition.⁵⁶ A serious drawback to this innovation was Marx's still teleological certainty as for the necessary constitution of the proletariat as a class "for itself" and the consummation of its historical mission grounded, as mentioned above, on an excessively totalising view of dialectics and on the tight model of (bourgeois) individual subjectivity.

The reasoning developed above points in the direction of a general picture of causal relations. The causal efficacy of each element in the interactive process (between individuals and classes) concurs with the formal - internal -

⁵⁵To achieve that we must count on the notion of "polysyllogism", discussed in G. Lukács, *Über die Besonderheit als Kategorie der Ästhetik*, p. 361. Despite its basic reference to the social classes in Lukács, it opens up a universe broader than that.

⁵⁶Whereby positions that establish, in economic terms or not, the structural positioning of classes turn to be misleading - and in the end dependent upon a reliance upon the notions of class in itself and for itself. Such is the case of the study by G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979 (1978), pp. 73ff. At the same time, subjectivist positions (which, in the last instance, at least partly accept this backdrop of structural determination) do not fare that well either. Thompson suffers from this limitation, notwithstanding his perception of classes as "relationships" and as processes, and his later too far fetched onslaught on Althusser. See Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981 (1963), pp. 8-9; and *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays*, London, Merlin, 1978. Moreover, a deeper acceptance of the **contingent** character of class consciousness might entail a vision of the relation between proletariat and socialism much closer to Lenin than Thompson would be willing to grant.

causality of the whole;⁵⁷ thereby the total character of the system is grasped, as a (dis)order constituted by multiple interactive processes. The material cause is, in contrast, despite the human belonging in the realm of nature, what must be placed outside social relations, whereby the famous thesis of the economic determination in the "last the instance"⁵⁸ gains partial plausibility, notwithstanding the lack of any justification for the attribution of causal superiority or priority to it. The status of a final causality, in terms of collective intentional action, is more ambivalent, not only because the unintended consequences of this collective action must be necessarily borne in mind, but also because the still slightly touched upon idea of collective intentionality demands further examination - discussion of which I shall postpone for below. In any event, Marx's notion of totality needs to be recast. It is very clear that we cannot count any longer on teleological principles which rigidly bind longitudinal and latitudinal aspects of social totalities, to recall Jay's categories. A much more fragmented and contingent notion of totality is in order, in both the latitudinal and the longitudinal dimensions of social systems. If history must be seen an open process, which is not

⁵⁷It does not affect my argument whether Marx held a view of dialectics as triadic - with thesis, antithesis and synthesis - or not, although one must agree that at least in *Capital* he did introduce other intermediate strata in the model of the capitalist "class structure". See Alan Swingewood, *A Short History of Sociological Thought*, pp. 84ff. Moreover, if he showed a tendency to simplify "class structure" in modern times in *The Communist Manifesto*, this did not imply, rather the opposite, anything similar in the past. The hypothesis sustained herein on the formal causality of social systems means, therefore, a complex and manifold dialectics between multiple elements, though they **might**, of course, be only two, in concrete cases.

⁵⁸K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. I, p. 112, and F. Engels, "Brief an Bloch", p. 463.

determined by material conditions of production, the comprehension of the generality of a social formation must not obscure the fact that particular collectivities and singular individuals retain a certain degree of autonomy and perhaps of distance regarding the overall patterns of value and organisation of the encompassing social system. Marx stressed that competitive market relations in capitalist society narrowly limit the options of classes and individuals, and in this case he seems to have been right. Subsumed by the generality of capital, the proletariat could affirm its particularity only by means of collective struggles. In other circumstances, however, with reference to other system, the relations between the general, the particular and the singular are much looser. I shall expand on this in a later chapter.

A final weakness in Marx's treatment of the issue must be tackled. If the notion of social class represented an attack on sacred bourgeois categories, and an important conceptual move as well, Marx's complete attachment to his innovation produced, on the other hand, a significative drawback. The notion is clearly too narrow to furnish the theoretical and narrative instruments that the analysis of social life demands, a quandary manifest in his own writings. In the celebrated study of the social stalemate that engendered Bonaparte's coup-de-etat Marx shed light over the role played by several collectivities, from the distinct fractions of the bourgeoisie (here Marx probably idealised the uniformity of the proletariat), the army, the newspapers, and other organisations. Whilst at the same time however probably making too close an approximation between classes and parties. What is particularly important to discern is the limited function the discourse about the social classes was asked

to perform, the depicting of their mutual constitution in the course of the struggle of the movements enrooted in their being notwithstanding.⁵⁹ *Pace* the central importance of classes in social life, it is necessary to recognise their insufficiency in terms of concrete explanations and descriptions. Additionally, even in Marx's discussions of the political restlessness of the French, the classes were, in fact, presented in a much more decentred and heterogeneous way, at least with respect to the several fractions he discerned in the bourgeoisie of that country.

Several Marxists, from Lenin to Gramsci, have been attentive to this issue, although mainly in substantive terms. The latter, for instance, observed that partially following Hegel's insight into the public-statist nature of social organisations that pre-figured political parties, Marx had arrived at a theorisation of political organisations. Sharing with that philosopher basically the same historical experience plus an awareness of mass politics, Marx fastened upon the dynamic of professional organisations, newspapers, jacobin clubs and small secret conspiratory groups.⁶⁰ But in the Gramsci, as much as in Marx, the classes, in a non-specified way, still furnish the backdrop of the conceptualisation, in spite of Gramsci's enormous amplification of the concrete problematic of political collectivities already found in Marx's more historical

⁵⁹K. Marx, *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, passim.

⁶⁰Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, v. I, Torino, Einaudi, 1975, pp. 56-7 (text of 1929/30).

writings and of his break through the more rigid teleological vision and hopes of the founder of the "philosophy of praxis".⁶¹

As we shall see later on, the reshaping of the broadest features of the concept of social class - in the terms of a general theory of collective subjectivity, since we shall not deal with its substantive content - is essential to specify its range of application and lend it a sharper edge. This step may have even wider consequences, insofar as the general thrust of this concept spilt over into other categories. After the main traits of Marx's social classes a number of others have been devised as historical subjects, such as those of race, gender, age, and so forth.⁶² Also in these cases, the relation between generality and particularity assumes a false and ideological dimension. Inasmuch as genders and specific races and ethnicities are hierarchically better positioned and thereby manage to define the generality of social formations, masking their own particularity, it is incumbent upon social movements of gender, races or ethnic groups which originate from a subordinate position to denounce this false universality. Often we see, however - as in some strands

⁶¹A recent critic is thereby correct when he indicts Marx's reduction of the political to the "social" realm, in his writings on the French Revolutions, with arbitrary political statements being cast to legitimise that simplification. See François Furet, *Marx et la Revolution Française*, Paris, Flammarion, 1986, pp. 93-6, 106 and 109. In contrast, the incongruity of an individualistic Marxism is brought out, in spite of a "plea" for this type of methodological canon, in a very interesting discussion on socialism and electoral systems in contemporary Europe (p. 97); we are, in fact, introduced to a complex setting wherein political parties and unions as well as social classes - unfortunately frozen as structural dimensions of individual perspectives - are endowed with much more central explicative capacity. See Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press/ Paris, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1988 (1985).

⁶²K. Eder, *The New Politics of Class*, pp. 44-5.

of feminism, anti-racism, or by and large in nationalist movements - these subordinate collectivities claim a universality which carries with it vested interests and ideological delusions.

Once we bear in mind Marx's syllogism, and widen it to deal with the full array of collectivities in social life, we can at least in principle avoid this ideological transfiguration of social relations. The analysis of those collectivities and movements could benefit from an approach based on the syllogism of the general, the particular and the singular. Feminist "dual systems" theories tend to evolve in this direction, especially when they encompass racial stratifications. They, however, often reproduce the idea of centred subjectivities with reference to women and men and in addition indulge in the exclusion of women from the (exclusively male) ruling classes - since they would be merely married to them - or diminishing the role that family units play.⁶³ These shortcomings may be otherwise avoided to the extent that greater cognisance of the differentiation, criss-crossing quality and variable homogeneity or heterogeneity of social systems, is forthcoming.⁶⁴ These are insights that will become henceforth central for our discussion.

⁶³This is the case with Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990. See, for the family, p. 65; and for women not belonging in the ruling classes, p. 183.

⁶⁴See, for instance, the works of Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*, London, Virago, 1987, specifically pp. 65 and 231; plus *Slow Motion. Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, London, Virago, 1990.

CHAPTER FIVE

PARSONS: SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND COLLECTIVE ACTORS

I)INDIVIDUALISM AND ANALYTICAL REALISM

The second main version of a theory of collective subjectivity is found in the work of Talcott Parsons. However, it did not come about in his first formulations, and Parsons never freed himself completely from the constraints of the heritage of the liberal thought he acknowledged as his world-view. Nevertheless, he advanced some very interesting ideas, connected to his notion of social system, which consisted in an important departure from some key elements of Enlightenment principles. But, lest the expectation of a break away from that movement's centred subject occur to the reader, it must be stated that Parsons did actually accept this as a core feature of his notion of **collective actor**.

His was a version of collective subjectivity that essentially differed from Marx's concept of social classes, which he accepted as relevant, without, however, adopting either its political dimension or even the particular sort of causality Marx attributed to those social entities. In fact, Parsons tried to get rid of Marx, treating him as a somewhat minor and, in any case, outdated figure in the social sciences. On the one hand, Weber, Durkheim and Pareto were deemed the true founding fathers of sociology. On the other, drawing upon his own former efforts as well as, presumably, Weber's understanding of social stratification, Parsons introduced a pluralistic view of social differentiation (or, in a less "value-free" manner, inequality). It depicted the collective aspect of social classes in a form that very closely resembled the structural-passive character attributed to social classes by a good number of

Marxist theorists. Above all, he did not regard classes as essentially in conflict.¹

Despite these drawbacks, one must agree with Alexander,² when he attributes a synthetical character to Parsons' first phase, which tended to be relinquished with the introduction of the paradigm of the four functions. This means that his theory of collective subjectivity was couched in the framework of a theoretical synthesis, conversely to what we have observed in terms of contemporary theorisation, insofar as these have constituted strands that have run parallel to each other.³

I made reference to an important facet of Parsons' understanding of what he called "social action", in its so-called "voluntaristic" version. This grounded his first phase of theoretical production. In the opening chapter (1.II) of this study, I dwelled upon the most individualistic aspect of his elaboration, which, curiously enough, but not unexpectedly, has been the one retained by vast majority of his followers - in conjunction or not with his increasingly

¹T. Parsons, "Social Classes and Class Conflict in the Light of Recent Sociological Theory" (1949), in *Essays in Sociological Theory*, New York, Free Press, 1964; and, for his later view of Marxism, "Some Comments on the Sociology of Karl Marx", in *Sociological Theory and Modern Society*, New York, Free Press, 1967. One must notice that Parsons never quoted Marx from his original texts. For his understanding of social stratification, see Idem, "A Revised Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification" (1953), in *Essays in Sociological Theory*.

²J. C. Alexander, *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons* (v. IV of *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*), Berkeley/ Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1983, especially pp. 151-2.

³Although Parsons had very little sympathy towards Marxism, he underscored the already synthetical character of that theory, which had brought utilitarianism and idealism together. See T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, pp. 118 and 489-93.

functionalist bias.⁴ Perhaps, one might point out his perception of individualistic theories as responsible for that subsequent misapprehension. The problem is that Parsons used to interpret utilitarianism as the expression of individualistic thinking.⁵ In terms of the historical origins of individualism he was certainly right, but his reading of Weber's work, under the strong influence of Durkheim's penchant for a more "collectivist" approach to social life, betrays his mistaken perception of that conception as pertaining to a supposedly superseded stage of social theory. According to this standpoint, therefore, the diverse forms of domination - or, in his bizarre translation, "imperative control" - play an outstanding role. As Weber did not share with the utilitarians a biological organic-materialistic interpretation of social processes, putting forward a multidimensional sociological theory, Parsons ended up overlooking the extent to which the German writer partook in the individualism of those pristine sources of modern European social science.⁶

Nonetheless, even in this earlier phase he was aware of problems related to the issues I have been trying to tackle. Above all, his commitment to the problematic developed by Alfred Whitehead, the English philosopher, furnished crucial elements for his development towards a non-individualistic approach. Parsons accepted Whitehead's critique of the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness", advanced against the substitution of theoretical abstractions for

⁴The exception in this case, although rather partial, Richard Münch, *Theorie des Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1988, pp. 61ff.

⁵T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, pp. 90ff.

⁶Idem, *Ibid.*, chaps. VIII-XVIII.

the organic character of the world. Whitehead refused the atomistic conception of human perception that the thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had established in conjunction with the progresses of modern physics. Thereof Parsons drew a notion of social action as a wholeness, wherein **actors, ends, situations** (divisible in **conditions** and **means**) and **norms**, should be grasped in their interrelationship - in spite of the fact that they could, and should, be broken down into discrete elements. That is the reason why, following the philosopher, Parsons supported the idea of **analytical realism** - whereby we could bring out the **anatomy**, i.e. the **structure** of social action.⁷

With Pareto, and Whitehead, Parsons depicted society as an organic whole, whence a great deal of his enthusiasm for the former's system of theory, which, although incomplete, was rendered altogether compatible with his own

⁷Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 28-44 and 730. For that Whitehead's view, see his *Science and the Modern World*, especially pp. 64 and 203. For the differences between their conceptualisations, consult Bernhard Miebach, *Strukturalistische Handlungstheorie*, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1984, pp. 51-2 and 66. This aspect of Parsons's thought has occasioned recent discussions on his possible "Kantianism" - which would be linked also to a theory of "interpenetration", to be touched upon below - and to the *a priori* character of his concepts, dispute also fostered by his own later self-definition - in, for instance, T. Parsons, "A Retrospective View", in Richard Grathoff, ed., *Correspondence of Alfred Schutz and Talcott Parsons*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978, (1940/1), p. 117. The contemporary positions are diversified in relation to this question. In favour of this interpretation, see R. Münch, *op. cit.*, pp. 46 and 63; J. C. Alexander, *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*, p. 175; and Harold J. Berashady, *Ideology and Social Knowledge*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1973, pp. 63 and 72; against it, see J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. 2, pp. 298 and 337; and B. Miebach, *op. cit.*, p. 12. Insofar as one centres on the relation between utilitarian interests and norms, this Kantian influence appears real enough, although it progressively gave way to a more Freudian perspective; in regard to epistemology, the idea of *a priori* concepts in Parsons just does not make any sense, *pace* his later self-misunderstanding.

theoretical position.⁸ With Durkheim, on the other hand, concurrently with a "collectivist" view of social life, according to which (at least in his interpretation) society would play a prominent whole, he stressed the interpenetration between social totalities and individuals. A common **normative**, therefore individually internalised system produced the basis whereupon this question found a solution. Parsons's incomplete split with individualism was, nonetheless, manifest in his acceptance of Durkheim's notion of society as a "*sui generis* reality". With that, against utilitarianism, he wished to ground a multidimensional sociological theory, with room for individual reflexive action, which would, however, be collectively structured by the internalisation of those norms. He read into Durkheim ideas that could barely be said to lie in his work, for Parsons introduced, clearly under Whitehead's influence, a distinction between abstractly taken individuals and concretely aggregated individuals that would bring about "emergent properties", giving rise to social life.⁹ If that distinction is rather interesting, one should be ready to discard that notion of emergent properties, since it supposes previously given individuals who, by their **aggregation**, constitute a new reality. Parsons, in one and the same breath, assumed, and disposed of, the individual cherished by the Enlightenment, with its prior existence as to society.

Many years later this lasting view had occasion to come up once more when he dealt with the notion of interaction: Parsons was adamant on its

⁸T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. 32 and chaps. V-VI.

⁹Idem, *Ibid.*, chaps. VIII-XIX.

paramount importance in the constitution of social life. Its peculiar character was not acknowledged, though, for it ended up being regarded as a mere outcome of the action of individuals given in advance, who come across each other in the social realm, an interpretation that has been severely criticised by some contemporary writers.¹⁰

The kernel of Parsons propositions at that first stage was produced by his reflection on the concept of **unit act**, which translated, analytically, the multidimensionality of social action, tying together actors, ends, situations (encompassing means and conditions of action) and norms. The last pages of *The Structure of Social Action* hinted at new and more complex issues, though, wherein those just mentioned problems became manifest. The concept of actor came then to the fore. According to Parsons, personalities comprise "nets of unit acts" (and the actor's body was taken as a conditional element of the situation, with a Cartesian division between matter and mind lurking behind). At the same time, however, he stated that groups should be considered as systems of action and as **actors**. Both individual actors and groups were portrayed as possessing "emergent properties" - and organic character; they could be understood as the units of social systems, alongside unit acts. The problem is that these new collective units were demoted to "secondary descriptive schemes", always reducible to an elementary level - insofar as the passage from acts to personalities, and from these to groups, would operate

¹⁰Idem, "Social Interaction" (1968), pp. 155-6 and 164-5. For a critique, which suffers from making a contraposition between system and life-world, see J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. 2, p. 301.

through an aggregation carried out by the social scientist.¹¹ It is hard not to view this supposition as in fact dissolving the organic internal nexus of personalities and groups, and even that of action as such.

At the core of his shortcomings lied an arguable distinction between analytical units - in fact ideally moulded - and analytical elements - which would be real, cutting across those fictitious units. According to this distinction, the former are individually given, whereas the latter are intertwined in reality. Unit acts belong in the first category, the elements that compose their structure in the second.¹² Alfred Schutz seems to have been essentially wrong when he interpreted Parsons' propositions as though they attached units to a concrete level and elements to an abstract one, to which the American sociologist retorted asserting their validity at both levels of analysis.¹³ His critique, and Parsons' impatient answer, make clear that both should be viewed on the same plane of generality and on an equal analytical footing. Unit acts,

¹¹T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, pp. 746-7.

¹²Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 38-44.

¹³A. Schutz, "Parsons' Theory of Social Action", in R. Grathoff, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 24-5, 64 and 74. Moreover, the postulation that action can be analytically broken down only by the actor is not a tenable one, contrary to what Schutz believed (pp. 37-43). We need to recognise, however, the process of abstraction that this operation inevitably represents, in any of the above listed cases, so that the atomism of the Enlightenment theory of perception is brushed aside together with its social individualist correlate, a point that eluded Parsons' discussion. The idea that action is *per se* already a "system" (or, better put, an organic structure) and thus a concept that presupposes that of "element" is commendable. See N. Luhmann, "The Future of a Theory", in *The Differentiation of Society*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982. He, however, derives from this the unjustifiable thesis that the notion of subject should be entirely discarded; this does not prevent him from pointing to something such as "collective action", which is reminiscent of Parsons' "collective actors". See Idem, *Soziale Systeme*, pp. 270ff.

individual actors and collectivities are to be dealt with as elements of social systems, which can be taken isolatedly only inasmuch as we proceed the analytical breaking down of the whole to which they belong. This comprehension would have led Parsons further in his critique of individualistic thought, more deeply assuming Whitehead's appraisal of Newtonian mechanics (closely related to the social atomism given pride of place in the social sciences firstly by Hobbes and later by others). Parsons fell short of taking this decisive step, for at the back of his mind the traditional concept of individual, so central to liberalism, still enjoyed a privileged place.

Unlike Whitehead, Parsons seems to have paid limited attention to contemporary physics, above all to quantum theory, and its essentially anti-atomistic thrust, although his second phase introduced ideas that moved in this direction. Whereas the relational characteristics of modern physics were taken up by Whitehead, the model that Hobbes had established, building upon Newton's achievements, as cardinal to the social sciences was largely retained in Parsons. He could not, therefore, renounce individualism wholeheartedly.

The notion of "emergent properties" must receive part of the blame for this weakness, arising at least partially from the tendency towards individualism. It constitutes, in fact, despite its apparent rejection of atomism, a compromise with its most entrenched principle. The term itself hints at this accommodation, for if something "emerges" from something else it is this last dimension that underpins the "emergent" reality: the properties of social systems would, therefore, be a mere outcome of an underlying individual reality rather than an overall, specific - and, in this precise sense only, *sui generis* - feature of the

interactive processes that constitute them. These properties should be broken down into their elements as well as social systems into individual actors solely in analytical terms. This would actually allow for the analytical "emergence" of the elements of social systems, in contrast to the individualistic tenets presupposed by the notion of "emergent properties". Nevertheless, we should not take this idea too far, since social systems' properties cannot be thought of without reference to the individuals and to the interactive and dialectical processes that produce them.

All the same, the collective dimension of "social action" held of Parsons' attention thereafter, with a strong emphasis placed upon the active aspect of social systems. This problematic belongs, though, with the other intuitions that blossomed in his second phase. At this early stage however his formulation was utterly trapped within the polarisation of passive social totalities and active-reflexive individual actors, with no room for dialectics and blind to concepts of interaction. It was a while before he began to overcome these limitations.

II)SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND COLLECTIVE ACTORS

The Structure of Social Action, a work in which are located the theses hitherto discussed, was published in 1937; Parsons' next major book, *The Social System*, came out only in 1951. In the meantime he had published a series of articles, several of which touched upon social movements and social structure, issues closely related to the problem of collective subjectivity. He

discussed class structure and social stratification in general; he examined the social structure of Germany in the period previous to the ascension of Nazism and the reasons which had led to the seizure of power by that movement as well as its own characteristics; during the war, working directly for the U. S. government, he worked on a planned change to the foundations of German society; he investigated the main features of Japanese social structure and analysed kinship, sex and age in the United States, paying heed also to the characteristics of the legal profession.¹⁴ This effort in terms of substantive research was, however, carried out on more modest theoretical bases, since as Parsons had not as yet crafted instruments that might enable him to grapple with collective subjectivities and he had to rely upon the ideas of previous sociologists. It was with that second crucial publication that he became equipped to answer those questions theoretically.

The architecture of this vast intellectual effort employed a manifold web of concepts. Parsons retained some essential traits of his first theoretical "frame of reference", which was transcended by means of some far-reaching alterations, though. A social system was characterised, in its simplest expression, as the interaction of a plurality of individual actors, motivated in terms of an "optimization of gratification" - but not its maximisation. Interactions take place in situations, defined at least partly in physical terms, counting, moreover, on a commonly shared and culturally structured "system of symbols". The new scheme thereby aspired to adopt a relational perspective,

¹⁴All these articles are gathered in T. Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory*, which includes, in its revised edition (herein quoted), a later discussion on MacCarthyism.

although Parsons fastened upon the orientation, in given situations, of individuals - which were regarded, analytically, as the most elementary components of any system of action.¹⁵

But Parsons was quite keen to a double distinction. On the one hand, he characterised his actors both as a **point of reference** and as a **system of action**; in the first case, they constituted the main unit of analysis, whereas in the second they should be broken down into the actions that bring them about. The notion was reminiscent of the problem already discussed in the closing pages of *The Structure of Social Action*, for he once more spoke of "aggregation", although in the new version of his theory he seemed to move away from his prior semi-atomistic persuasion. A parallel distinction between individuals and collectivities was introduced, which hinged primarily on whether the actor that was taken as the point of reference was an individual or a social system.¹⁶

Individual actors, however, act according to their **motivation**, which was grasped by our author via the concept of "need-dispositions", wherein the first term brought out the personality's necessity of equilibrium and the second stressed its volitional component. Both elements were said to work in terms of an individual's "gratification-deprivation" balance; therewith we are introduced to a sort of renewed version of the utilitarian understanding of human actors.

¹⁵Idem, *The Social System*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979 (1951), pp. 3ff.

¹⁶Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 4, and T. Parsons and Edward A. Shils, "Values, Motives and Systems of Action", in T. Parsons, E. A. Shils *et al.*, *Towards a General Theory of Action*, New York, Harper & Row, 1962 (1951), p. 56.

It is imperative, though, that we underline the role played by cultural values, most certainly according to a culturalist reading of Freud: internalised, they channel the flux of energy of the organism, orienting the actors, positively or negatively, to the objects that comprise their situation; in the interactive process, culture furnishes the parameters - what he called the "pattern-variables" - to the relation between "ego" and "alter". Simultaneously, he traced a distinction between social systems, the systems of the personalities of the individual actors and the cultural systems enmeshed in their action. This is just an analytical distinction, insofar as the three of them would always be present in any concrete system of action.¹⁷

Parsons has often been accused of postulating a static view of society, conservatively concerned with the problem of order at the expense of the universe of change. The charge, though exaggerated, is warranted, less possibly for some of his central concepts *per se*, but rather because of twists he was prone to impinge on them - although the aesthetic character of a theory, in this case fashioned more according to stability than to change, has also political implications, since it evinces a specific sensibility. His general concept of interaction, grasped at first through what takes place between **ego** and **alter**, was, at least in principle, more flexible than those put forward by a good many others. He spoke about a "double contingency" that would be at the core of the relation between those two actors, whereby they would adjust themselves, and

¹⁷T. Parsons, *The Social System*, pp. 4-13, and T. Parsons, E. A. Shils *et al.*, "Some Fundamental Categories of the Theory of Action: a General Statement", pp. 5-10, and T. Parsons and E. A. Shils, *op. cit.*, p. 57, in T. Parsons, E. A. Shils *et al.*, *op. cit.*

the norms that regulate their interaction, to each others expectations and actual behaviour. The shortcoming was produced by his quick shift towards rampant normative standarts as a solution for this fluidity that threatened to introduce too much indeterminacy in his theory.¹⁸

In order to account for the structural description of social systems, Parsons introduced a new group of categories in this intermediate period.¹⁹ The "unit of action" furnished the most basic category of his scheme - substituting the former "unit act": it would be even more elementary, since the actor's expectations do not necessarily yield clearly expressed and pursued **ends**. No reference was, however, made to collective actors. The "role-status" category, chiefly aimed at "macroscopic" analyses, came next, in a higher order, insofar as the structure of the social system consists of the structure of the relations between the actors in interaction. But he devised two other units that could help with our analytical effort to break down the structure of the social system. These were the "individual" and the "collectivity". The former should not be mistaken for the personality, being composed of a group of statuses and roles; the latter, in turn, constituted the main axis of Parsons notion of collective subjectivity. We must expand on it at length now.

The collectivity was seen as a composite unity, as an actor and as an object to which other actors are oriented, and in whose centre is placed the

¹⁸T. Parsons, *The Social System*, pp. 36ff. In this same book (pp. 439ff), the breakdown of boundaries and the instability potentially present in the doctor-patient relation were witness to this fluidity and Parsons' attempt at overpowering it.

¹⁹T. Parsons, *The Social System*, pp. 8-9 and 25-6.

role-status structure that articulates the actions of the individuals that make up the system. The individuals' actions that are relevant for a specific social system must be distinguished from their other activities. In his joint reflections with Shils, Parsons was, moreover, quite keen on stressing that the definition of a collectivity implied "...the three properties of collective goals, shared goals, and of being a single system of interaction with boundaries defined by incumbency in the roles constituting the system...". These boundaries might, however, be latent; conversely, the stress put on the goals shared by the individuals that comprise the collectivity was absolute. The action of a collectivity was, therefore, defined as **"the action in concert of a plurality of individual actors"**. Therein the **integration** of the members around a **common system of values** held centre stage, and their orientation towards the collectivity, rather than to their self-interest, was decisive for the establishment of the collectivity, guaranteeing its **internal solidarity**.²⁰

They proposed two senses in a which a collectivity should be regarded as an actor:

- 1) as a social system in relation to a situation outside itself. In the most important case, the collective actor is a subsystem of the larger social system interacting as a unit with other subsystems and/ or individual actors (which are taken as objects of its situation). Viewed internally the collective actor must be

²⁰T. Parsons and E. A. Shils, "Values, Motives, and Systems of Action", in T. Parsons and E. A. Shils *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-3. See also p. 180 of the same publication for more on the collectivity and on motivation.

interpreted as a concert of actions and reactions of individual actors, and the conceptual scheme for its analysis will thus be that used for the analysis of **social systems**. The conceptual scheme used in the analysis of personality systems is hence inappropriate for the description of a collective actor. The **mechanisms** which explain the action of a collective actor are those of the social system, not of the personality. 2)A collectivity may be viewed as an actor when it is the point of reference for the action of an individual actor in a **representative role**.²¹

The effort they made to separate these collective actors from two other "types of social aggregates" is revealing of their commitment to the Enlightenment's subject, an issue on which I shall concentrate below. The first denoted a "category of persons" who have some attribute in common, such as age, sex or education; it did not entail "action in concert". The second type consisted of a "plurality of persons who are merely interdependent with one another ecologically"; an ideally competitive market, for instance, would exemplify this sort of social system. An important differentiation between two kinds of social system had crept in, therefore, which nonetheless assumed greater prominence in the later phase of Parsons' theorisation. They concluded their sketch of the collectivity as an actor describing the relationships of sub-collectivities within a "larger inclusive collectivity". They might be

²¹Idem, Ibid., p. 61.

independent from each other, with no "overlapping" membership; they might overlap, sharing some members, but not all; and the smaller system might be utterly encompassed by the larger collectivity, the former perhaps constituted by the specification of role-expectations and actions that stem from the overall value-pattern of the latter. In this last case, we have what was known as the "onion-like" metaphor. They carried these ideas further, clinging to a most traditional notion, which also harked back to the Enlightenment, and put forward the thesis that a **society** (actually the social system delimited by the modern nation-state) must be treated as **the** "total social system", for it is self-subsistent.²²

It should be evident at this stage that all the operations contemplated by Parsons in this second phase of his career demand a lot from analytical procedures. One could say that his understanding of what he used to call "analytical realism" was now deeper - action was treated as a system, to be then decomposed. The same is true as for collectivities and the groups of status-roles. It is arguable, however, the extent to which it is really warranted to lump all these concepts together, as if they belonged with one another. The "unit of action" - in precisely the same way as its antecessor, the "unit act" - as well as the status-role structures - are fictitious entities to be crafted by the researcher. The opposite obtains as for individuals and collectivities. Although one could support the idea that these two concepts may be construed as aggregations constructed by the social scientist, they in fact exist in concrete terms. The aim of the operation of abstraction is, therefore, different. These

²²Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 193-6.

two pairs of concepts - unit of action/ status-role and individuals/ collectivities - criss-cross each other, for they are defined in distinct levels of analysis and with a different ontological basis. On yet another plane we find the tripartite division of cultural system, social system and personality - which Habermas is right to criticise because it implies a reification of culture, which is detached from its concrete interactive settings, despite his own structuralist reification of the latter concept.²³

It is necessary to attack Parsons' version of collective subjectivity for its complete reliance upon the traditional model of the centred individual actor, which was transposed to the level of collectivities and unjustifiably entailed an anthropomorphic view of the social system.²⁴ Shared collective goals and solidly defined boundaries - given by the presence of status-role structures - are ideas borrowed directly from the most traditional notions of individual subjectivity. Equally debatable is his refusal to allow for dispositions that would refer to collectivities. The same is true as for his reduction of collective dispositions to the motivations of individual agents. These two conceptualisations, in distinct ways, are dependent upon notions that stem from the Enlightenment. Whilst in the former the collective subject was crafted in

²³J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, pp. 328-33 and 355. One of Parsons' original collaborators had already disagreed with this conceptualisation - see Richard C. Sheldon, "Some Observations on Theory in Social Sciences", in T. Parsons, E. A. Shils *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 39. The main exponent of the neo-functionalist movement refuses, however, this critical attitude: J. C. Alexander, *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*, p. 349.

²⁴Stephen Savage, *The Theories of Talcott Parsons*, London, Macmillan, 1981, pp. 191-2. He comments on the harmful repercussions of this step when the "polity" (see below) was honoured as the "collective mind of society".

the mould of the individual actor, in the latter it was reduced, ontologically, to its individual component members. By this I do not mean to imply that collective subjectivities always possess clearly defined motivations, a thesis which is not, incidentally, very congenial to contemporary psychology even in individual terms. Rather, I wish to suggest, and later develop, the idea that collectivities - i.e. social systems - may develop certain collective impulses and put more or less clear goals to themselves. This is a contingent possibility, which hinges on the peculiar type of social system we happen to be focusing on and its situation at a specific stage.

Parsons' commitment to the notion of the individual which, from Descartes and Hobbes on, has been one of the pillars of modern social theory, was plainly stated when he approached the concept of personality. He vigorously stressed the dimensions of integration and equilibrium. His emphasis on the role of the "superego" was symptomatic of his point of view; furthermore, he frowned upon Freud's attempt at a deconstruction of individual subjectivity, as carried out in his division of the personality into the ego, the superego and the id. The unit, continuity and orderliness of the subject was assumed by Parsons as a core notion of the "sciences of action".²⁵ At the level of collective subjectivity the implication of this approach was the confinement of the concept of actor to a specific type of collectivity.

²⁵T. Parsons, "The Superego and the Theory of Social Systems" (1952), in T. Parsons, E. A. Shils and Robert F. Bales, *Working Papers in the Theory of Action*, Illinois, Free Press, 1953. Decentring of the subject (multiple selves and interactive formation), both in the individual and the collective level were, however, hinted at in Idem, "Cooley and the Problem of Internalization", in Albert Reiss, Jr., ed., *Cooley and Sociological Analysis*, Ann Harbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1968, pp. 59-62 and 65.

Despite the wealth of suggestions, and especially the awareness of the problem he showed, Parsons tended to water down his notion of collective actor. Inasmuch as he rendered their subjectivity as the "concerted action" of their individual members, he could not help embracing once more the traditional dichotomy between passive social systems - society even, since, as we have seen, this was the most inclusive social system he recognised - and active individual actors. This is certainly the most severe obstacle to the utilisation of Parsons' notion of collective subjectivity in the endeavour proposed by this study, and we must altogether reject it.²⁶ If we need to reckon with the **properties** of social systems, there is no reason to insist on the idea that they should be reduced to their passive dimension. We should try to bridge the gap between passive systems and active individuals instead.

Robert Dubin²⁷ had already pointed out inconsistencies in Parsons' definition of collective actors, in particular in their relation to the so-called "pattern-variables", i.e. the concepts that establish the values that orient the actors in a certain situation. He showed the lack of links between these two concepts, which should produce no wonder if we bear in mind that Parsons

²⁶It is not by chance that we can even observe Parsons' students imagining to be faithful to the master, whilst simultaneously disposing of the concept of collective actor because of a commitment to methodological individualism. The outcome is a deformed reading of Parsons, encapsulated in the expression "institutional individualism", which, originally devised to interpret a specific phase of the social evolution of the West, is misused to supposedly describe the main thrust of his theory. The source of confusion lies in Parsons' own work. See the misguided effort of François Bourricaud, *L'Individualism Institutionnel*, (Vendone), Press Universitaires de France, 1977.

²⁷Robert Dubin, "Parsons' Actor: Continuities in Social Theory", in T. Parsons, *Sociological Theory and Modern Society*, pp.523-4.

was prone to reduce these collectivities to the action of their individual members. What was certainly missing was a notion of interaction between collective subjectivities. The production of culture and its continuous transformation should be addressed at this level as well. The "onion-like" character of social systems - or even their only partial interpenetration - is, moreover, consistent with Hegel's and Marx's insights on the syllogism of the general, the particular and the singular, discussed in foregoing pages (chap. 4.II).²⁸ The multilayered and unevenly intertwined aspect of social systems in their ongoing interactive processes was highlighted in certain central passages of Parsons' own writings.

A further problem in this regard concerns his view of social change. Notwithstanding the assumption that a "good theory" should be able to deal with processes of transformation within the system and processes of change of the system, he postulated a basic "law of inertia", which meant a basic **theoretical** stability of the patterns of "boundary-maintaining" systems. The "homeostasis" in relation to the environment, as in the case of biological organisms, was, therefore, adopted. Changes of the system were as yet hard to grasp for we lacked concepts that could appraise mutations of the patterns within the system. Empirical generalisations, descriptions and comparisons should be introduced to fill the gap.²⁹

We can recall Dahrendorf's critique and his suggestion of a sort of "structuration" theory that would substitute an approach that dwelt upon the

²⁸See M. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, p. 14.

²⁹T. Parsons, *The Social System*, pp. 480-6 and 534-5.

fluid and changeable character of reality for Parsons' perspective, focused, as it was, on ideas of "equilibrium".³⁰ More interesting, perhaps, in the context of this study, is to note not only a sliding of the theoretical notion of equilibrium into empirical assumptions, but also to draw attention to the total disappearance of his onion-like scheme and the action of collectivities in his discussion of social change. Not even the analysis of Nazism and Soviet communism profited from these ideas: what stood out in his treatment was the pair passive systems and motivated individuals, despite references to the "charismatic movements" that brought about those historical changes.³¹ As will be seen, he later on reinforced the rigidity of such an approach.

Having said that, I want to recover Parsons' interpretation of the concept of **structure**. In his opinion, structures would be devices, analytically designed by the researchers, according to the needs of their work. They do not possess, thus, an ontological, substantial reality.³² This seems to be a more appropriate definition of structure, very distinct from the one Giddens advances. It is much closer, on the other hand, to the ideal and operative models supported by Bourdieu. If we are dealing with collective subjectivity, its structure may be brought to the fore, in terms of an abstract model, conditional to the particular social system in focus and to the purposes of the inquiry. The structuring of

³⁰Ralf Dahrendorf, "Out of Utopia: toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis", *American Journal of Sociology*, v. LXIV, 1958 (517:527).

³¹T. Parsons, *The Social System*, pp. 520ff. A more flexible, though cursory, treatment is found in T. Parsons and E. A. Shils, op. cit., pp. 230-3.

³²T. Parsons, "Some General Problems of Sociological Theory" (1970), in *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*, p. 236.

the social system, which stems from the social relations that obtain within it, can be therefore brought out by such a model.

III)FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS AND COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY

A central component of this period of Parsons' theorisation consisted of his use of "structural-functional" strategies. These would constitute handy devices, a "second best" alternative, for we could not as yet count on a developed system of deductive propositions similar to the one classical physics offered as a model. The main tools of the social scientist were, hence, the proposed "generalized categories" of analysis, alongside the definition of "mechanisms" that might permit the grasp of the functionality or disfunctionality of the motivational processes of the individual members of a social system for its maintenance or development. It would equip us with a **paradigm** that might enable great advancements, although it stopped short of providing a proper system of analytical categories and laws of the sort he yearned for already in his first book. The connections between individuals and social systems were, therefore, grasped in terms of the motivations of the former, through the mediation of culture, and its embodiment in the interactive network of the latter. The notion of "equilibrium" was essential to this sort of operation.³³ It triggered off a long polemic in which "conflict theories" were played off against Parsons' model.

³³Idem, *The Social System*, pp. 36 and 481-3.

It is feasible and to a great extent correct to suggest that functional analysis was not that important in this intermediate phase of Parsons' career; structural description was responsible for the bulk of the analytical work.³⁴ Subsequently, though, the relation was inverted, with negative consequences for Parsons' theory. He was rather explicit on the distinguished task the concept of function should perform in his final theory, discarding the expression "structural-functionalism" on behalf of a concentration on functional operations.³⁵

Greek pre-Socratic cosmology imagined that the whole universe could have its most intimate secrets revealed through its reduction to four elements - earth, fire, water and air. Likewise, Parsons presumed he had found the key that would open the door to the thorough analysis of social life with the four functions of his AGIL scheme. The decisive inspiration for that stemmed from Robert Bales' work on interactive processes in small groups. Parsons, Edward Shils and Bales endeavoured to bring their lines of thought together, with a fair amount of distortion and change to the original Parsonian concepts ensuing from this. Some writers consider that this last phase of Parsons looked from the system down to the actors, whereas the antecedent ones looked from the

³⁴François Chazel, *La Théorie Analytique de la Société dans l'Oeuvre de Talcott Parsons*, Paris, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes/ Mouton & Co., 1979, pp. 89-91.

³⁵See T. Parsons, "The Present Position and Prospects of Sociological Theory" and "The Prospects of Sociological Theory" (1950), in *Essays in Sociological Theory*.

opposite direction.³⁶ This is a reading which, however, is compatible only with an extremely individualistic conception of the actor (in which case, at any rate, Parsons would believe his scheme still to be valid).

At the heart of Parsons' new approach we once more encounter the concept of equilibrium; whereby the notion of change implied imbalances that could be introduced from outside the system. From this basic idea he derived four analytical phases, which a system undergoes during an interval of time, once it is set in movement by an external impulse: A) the phase of **adaptation**, marked by "adaptive-instrumental" activity, whereby the system seeks to meet the demands of reality and the transformation of its external environment; G) the phase of **goal-attainment**, characterised by "expressive-instrumental" activity, associated with the attainment of the system's aims and, therefore, with its "gratification"; I) the phase of systemic **integration**, wherein "expressive-integrative" activity has a key role to play, making the unity compact and demarcated *vis-à-vis* its environment; and L) the **latency** phase, in which "symbolic-expressive" activity comes to the fore and the maintenance of the motivational and cultural patterns is secured.³⁷

The concepts of "inputs" and "outputs" supplied a new tool to the identification and explanation of a system's activity, addressing the processes

³⁶R. Dubin, op. cit., p. 530, and J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. II, pp. 387ff.

³⁷T. Parsons, E. Shils and R. Bales, "Phase Movement in Relation to Motivation, Symbol Formation and Role Structure" and T. Parsons and R. F. Bales, "The Dimensions of Action-Space", in *Working Papers in the Theory of Action*, pp. 164-5 and 138ff, respectively. The definition of these phases was linked to a reinterpretation of the pattern-variables developed by Parsons.

of disequilibrium and equilibration, and leading up to the **interchange** theory, which grappled with the trade between the system and its environment. The former referred to the contributions that come either from outside the system or from the erstwhile phase; the latter alluded either to the state of the system or to its situation at the end of a phase or else of the process as whole.³⁸ Later on he introduced into his systems' theory the notion of **cybernetic hierarchy**, whereby those phases or functions that compose the AGIL scheme stood in a relation of control and flow of energy. Those rich in **information** were placed at the top of the hierarchy of control, whereas those rich in energy were assigned the bottom of this edifice, despite, at least in principle, although not in Parsons' subsequent formulations, their equal importance for the general process.³⁹

The riddle of social change was to be at last solved with recourse to the new functional method, which would afford the knowledge of processes within the system. The notion of "inputs" was instrumental in this case: in spite of oscillations, he attributed the changes of the system to sources **outside** or

³⁸T. Parsons, E. Shills and R. F. Bales, op. cit., pp. 215ff.

³⁹T. Parsons, "An Outline of the Social System", in T. Parsons *et al.*, *Theories of Society*, New York, Free Press, 1961, pp. 30-7. Even his main follower today has, thus, to acknowledge the "sociological idealism" coupled with Parsons' attempt at a multidimensional social theory. See J. C. Alexander, *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*, pp. 152, 212, 219 and 273. It should be clear that the phases of the AGIL scheme, originally drawn in terms of the movement of a system, tended henceforth to be treated basically in static terms. For more on his final version of systems' theory, consult T. Parsons, "Social Systems" (1968), in *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*.

inside it, i.e. derived from its previous situation.⁴⁰ Thereby he moved away from an exclusive concentration on internal processes (in principle making room for external contingent influences). This did not mean, regrettably, that he appreciated the interactive dimension of social systems, on which I shall insist later on.

With this theoretical asset, Parsons not only undertook to explain social systems, but also applied his now completely developed functional premises to the relations between social, cultural and personality systems and the "behavioral (biological) organism" (later reshaped as the "behavioral system"). Taking his ambition and formalism to astonishing heights, he tried even to include the human condition and physiological processes within his scheme. These are efforts that need not to be analysed here. We must focus our attention on how his collective actors related to this new paradigm.

Already the notion of collective actor had presented problems to which Parsons was oblivious. The power the AGIL scheme was endowed with just made things more complicated. Hitherto the concepts of **collectivity** and **collective actor** were virtually identical: they were synonymous with each other. Thereafter this was true no longer. The conflation between the analytical level - wherein the functions were warranted - and the concrete level, as

⁴⁰T. Parsons, R. F. Bales and E. A. Shils, "Phase Movement in Relation to Motivation, Symbol Formation and Role Structure", pp. 164 and 215. On the other hand, the concept of "adaptation", though subordinated to his growing "sociological idealism", took on a key role in the explanation of change in evolutionary terms. See T. Parsons, *Societies. Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1966, pp. 20ff.

Alexander argued clearly occurred widely in Parsons' last phase,⁴¹ wrought havoc in his formulations. In collaboration with Neil Smelser, Parsons distinguished social systems from collectivities: that first concept encompassed the second, but the reverse did not hold true. Therefore,

A social system...is **any** system generated by the interaction of two or more behaving units.

In contrast,

A collectivity, on the other hand, is a **special type** of social system which is characterized by the capacity for 'action in concert'. This implies the mobilization of the collectivity's resources to attain specific and usually explicit goals; it also implies the formalization of decision-making processes on behalf of the collectivity as a whole...The formal organization (e.g., a bureaucracy in the widest sense) is the prototype of such a system.⁴²

The economy, the subject of their book, was, as a consequence of that, conceived of as a social system, but not as a collectivity. It was seen as a

⁴¹J. C. Alexander, *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*, p. 192.

⁴²T. Parsons and Neil Smelser, *Economy and Society*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956, pp. 14-5.

subsystem of society, differentiated in terms of its specialised functions, a quality it shared with the other subsystems Parsons later conceptualised - the "polity", the "societal community" and the "pattern-maintenance" system.⁴³ A collectivity, in turn, was supposed to be **always** "multi-functional", notwithstanding the fact that some collectivities might have **primarily** economic functions. On other occasions he completed his depiction of collectivities as social systems that fulfil two other criteria - clarity in terms of membership status and internal differentiation of statuses and functions.⁴⁴

He proceeded, then, with an analysis of formal organisations, confirming his general postulation. They included a range of collectivities such as governmental bureaucracies or departments, business firms, hospitals, universities, etc. A family was only in part an organisation and other kinship groups even less so, the same obtaining as for local communities, society as a whole, etc.; informal working groups, cliques of friends, etc., did not exist as organisations.⁴⁵ He confused the issue, however, when he treated elementary and secondary schools - supposedly organisations - as "agencies" that act having as a "primary function" the socialisation of individuals and the allocation of human resources in society, singling out the class room as the

⁴³For this notions, see Idem, *Ibid.*, chaps. 1-2, and T. Parsons, "An Outline of the Social System", pp. 34ff.

⁴⁴T. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1971, p. 8.

⁴⁵Idem, "A Sociological Approach to the Theory of Organizations", in *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*, Illinois, (Glencoe), The Free Press, 1960; on the family, see his "The American Family: its Relation to Personality and to the Social Structure" (1956), in T. Parsons *et al.*, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968.

place wherein this process in fact occurs. He recognised, moreover, peer groups with "fluid boundaries" as relevant for this process as well.⁴⁶

This was an awkward statement. It tended to blur the distinctions that Parsons was at pains to establish. It put in question also an element which, already present since the fifties, took on a major importance with the burgeoning influence of biology in his work during his final years. Following the lead of the physiologist Lawrence J. Henderson, he regarded social systems as "living organisms", differentiated from their environment by means of boundaries, which they must maintain so as to secure their equilibrium - understood as "homeostasis" at this stage - and continuity.⁴⁷ If collectivities demand clear goals and decision-making centres, social systems necessarily imply a clear-cut separation from their environment and a compact internal constitution.

It is amazing to observe how much Parsons was a prisoner of the most traditional concept of actor and of a similar conception of society. His collectivities were built very much after the model of a purposive, reflexive and centred subject; his concept of social system was, likewise, embedded in this tradition, for it also implied similar principles of constitution, given by the attributes brought out through his AGIL scheme. Adaptation, goal-attainment, integration and latency reproduced, in a slightly different manner, respectively the attempts at mastering the situation in which a collectivity "acts", in order

⁴⁶Idem, "The School Class as a Social System: Some of its Functions", in *Social Structure and Personality*, London, Collier-Macmillan, 1964.

⁴⁷Idem, "On Building Social Systems Theory: a Personal History" (1971), in *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*, pp. 27-8.

to achieve clearly stated goals, plus the solidity and reflexivity, associated with decision-making centres, that typify these collective subjectivities.⁴⁸ A fundamental dissimilarity was yielded, however, by the causality these two categories exhibit. Whereas collectivities were seen as causally active, social systems defined in terms of the AGIL scheme were deemed passive, unless we credit functional statements with **onto-teleological** qualities, rather than with methodological, counter-factual status. Parsons himself, except occasionally, was not prone to assume the first alternative. Furthermore, he recognised that functional explanations do not demand, in fact tend to put off, **causal** connections⁴⁹ - especially if they are thought out in terms of efficient impact. His realisation of the importance of collective subjectivity nonetheless prevented him from completely neglecting his former collective actors, which, even so, received diminished attention. The theory of evolution he sketched out in his last years was witness to the distorting reverberations of the all-embracing application of the AGIL scheme.⁵⁰

A number of Parsons' students and more recent neo-functionalists have shown a much more subtle understanding of this issue, in concrete terms only, though, for they have not addressed the underlying theoretical shortcoming in

⁴⁸It is interesting to notice that Parsons characterised American culture and society in terms of an "activist" ethos, according to which individuals strive to master their environment rather than adjust passively to it. Cf. Idem, "A Tentative Outline of American Values" (1959 or 1960), in Roland Robertson and Bryan S. Turner, eds., *Talcott Parsons, Theorist of Modernity*, London, Sage, 1991.

⁴⁹T. Parsons, "Cause and Effect in Sociology", in Daniel Lerner, ed., *Cause and Effect*, New York, Free Press, 1965, pp. 66-7.

⁵⁰Idem, *Societies* and *The System of Modern Society*, both *passim*.

regard to collectivities that informed the flawed final conception Parsons advanced with such confidence. Although they have often concentrated on what Alexander defines as more "intermediate" levels of analysis, in which groups and collectivities are of outstanding and immediate significance, they neglect the central question I have been trying to highlight.⁵¹

Had Parsons sustained a broader and looser conception of subjectivity there would have been no need for such clear-cut separation between those concepts. More specifically, the social systems that do not follow the centring that distinguishes "formal organizations" - such as the economy, the polity, the pattern maintenance system and the social community, leaving aside the validity of this particular conceptualisation - could, and should, be characterised as collective subjectivities. In spite of their decentring, they exert their collective causality in very much the same way those others do, irrespective of the lesser level of intentionality, that is of final causality, they possess. Moreover, he would have no reason to overlook Marx's notion of social classes as collective subjectivities, for him a mere aspect of the structural stratification of society. With these closing remarks we tread beyond the limits of Parsonianism and head out on the path we must now follow in order to arrive at a transformed notion of collective subjectivity.

⁵¹See J. C. Alexander, *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*, p. 194; Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Institutionalization and Change", *American Sociological Review*, v. 29, 1964 (375:386); and also several of the papers amassed in J. C. Alexander, ed., *Neofunctionalism*, Beverly Hills, Sage, 1985, plus J. C. Alexander and Paul Colomy, eds., *Differentiation Theory and Social Change*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1990.

PART III

SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY

INTRODUCTION: THEORY AND SYNTHESIS

Having looked at the main syntheses in contemporary sociological theory and the two main theories of collective subjectivity in the social sciences, the final stage of this study will attempt to rework some central themes that are present in these two broad strands. A synthesis of those two theories, Marx's and Parsons' conceptions of collective subjectivity, will be undertaken. Furthermore, I shall make an effort to integrate the chief elements we find in the work of Giddens and Habermas, but also in other contributions to sociological theory, some of which display a synthetical ambition. Contemporary authors, who have tackled the concepts of collective actor or similar notions will be focused on in the course of the discussion. The concept of collective subjectivity thereby produced will, moreover, demand that some other contributions are brought into play, especially those related to the idea of the "decentring" of the subject as well as certain reflections that will assist in a further development of my conceptualisation.

Instead of a mechanical and abstract synthesis, which would just amalgamate Marx's and Parsons' approaches, the one proposed herein will, on the contrary, imply a broadening of the concept of collective subjectivity, which will not simply consist of a Hegelian "negation of the negation". Rather, it will be pursued with recourse to what Bachelard referred to as the **opening up** of concepts, for they need to be brought to another, higher level of

generality.¹ The concepts of social class and collective actor will be, consequently, encompassed by a more general one, the concept of **collective subjectivity**, which will allow not only for the causality of these two types of social system, but for the full range of collectivities we can find in social life.

Alexander, however, embraces an excessively blunt mechanism, which would govern such processes of synthesis, so as to arrive at an "objective logic" that would warrant the autonomous development of theoretical sociology.² I regard as mistaken his conception of theory as entirely independent of more empirically oriented domains of social science. For him, there would be just a movement of **specification** from the more general to the less general levels of theorisation (despite his acceptance that the less general levels produce new data),³ hypothesis that lends an abstract and in the end epistemologically idealistic flavour to his view.⁴ Marx had already targeted

¹G. Bachelard, *La Philosophie du Non*, pp. 30-3 and 137. I move in the direction of what could be characterised as a process of "abstraction" and "generalisation". See also Jean Piaget and Rolando Garcia, *Psychogenesis and the History of Science*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1989 (1983), p. 270. They put forward the concept of "reflective abstraction" for the operation carried out herein. A more "empirically oriented" discussion - original source of inspiration for this research, and finally "middle-range" outcome - that has concretely handled the concept of collective subjectivity is found in my "A América. Intelectuais, Interpretações e Identidades", *Dados*, v. 35, 1992 (267:289).

²J. C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, v. 1, pp. 114ff.

³Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴That happens, to a great extent, because he works basically within a Kuhnian framework, wherein the connection between empirical data and theoretical reasoning is totally one-sided.

this sort of operation, in its original Hegelian version,⁵ and I regard his critique as relevant to Alexander's standpoint: general theories are totalities, however sometimes heterogeneous, that ought not to be thought of in utter separation from empirical inputs. They have their own internal logic and development, but must be open to empirical imports which have a central role to play in their formation and change. Middle range theories, in particular when already concerned with theoretical problems, can be especially useful to connect general theories with empirical progress.

I support, nevertheless, a relative autonomy to the theoretical realm. It is in this space of relative autonomy that this study originates. It must be clear, at any rate, that the perspective of general theory worked out here is at the opposite pole to a Kantian, "foundational" attitude towards general theory.⁶ To be sure, Marx's discussion on the social classes is directly empirically oriented, as is Parsons' collective actor, built in part after the model of organisations. Other writers will be reviewed who also bring up some important empirical questions. I shall resort to some middle range theories and moreover make use of some concrete, though imaginary, examples in order both to help develop, via inductive insights, the theory of collective subjectivity and facilitate the understanding of my ideas.

⁵K. Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, pp. 21-2.

⁶For a critique of such foundational attitude, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980. However, contrary to Rorty, I espouse a realist perspective, which should be seen in relation to an idea of "research programmes" that precludes "instant" falsification or induction.

I shall start by proposing some basic conceptual definitions in chapter six, which will bring together some of the main strands of contemporary sociological theory, although they will receive a formulation which I regard as more interesting. I must proceed then to tackle two other tasks. The term "constitution" has been recently utilised by Giddens to underline the ongoing processes that characterise the existence of social systems in general. I will attach to it a further meaning, which is intended to bring out the main elements whereof they are made up. This was the main thrust of Parsons' AGIL scheme, supposedly multidimensional, but in fact impaired by a sort of sociological idealism, as Alexander clearly perceived, and completely connected to a very traditional notion of subjectivity. Moreover, Parsons cast his theory in a functionalist mould, lumping together issues that belong to different realms, such as intentionality and causality (goal-achievement), identity and centring (integration) and the constitution of those systems as such (adaptation and latency) (see chap. 5.III). Chapter seven will dwell at length upon those two first matters, lending them a thoroughly distinct perspective, and turn them into contingent possibilities. Chapter eight will concentrate on the remaining elements, on space-time, resources and social stratification. Finally, a typology and a controlling frame of reference will be proposed in the conclusion, which will be applied with respect to the impact of Protestant sects in the emergence of modern society. The concept of social systems as collective subjectivities will remain throughout the core of my reasoning.

CHAPTER SIX

INTERACTION, SYSTEM AND STRUCTURE

I)A CONCEPT OF INTERACTION

We very often come across definitions of the elementary units of analysis in the social sciences as consisting of individual actors, as in the propositions of methodological individualists, or of types of action, as in Weber's case (despite his intuition that relations between actors are focus of social processes for social scientists), or of "unit acts", as suggested by Parsons (see chap. 1.III-IV and chap. 5.I). Although these may be useful approaches to the analytical breaking down of social phenomena, I shall follow Marx and deem **interaction** the "cell", the "elementary form" for the analysis of social life. As we have seen (in chap. 4.III), in its reified commodity expression under capitalist conditions, it received a privileged place in his approach to the analytical study of that mode of production. I therefore agree also with other authors such as Georg Simmel and Jonathan Turner, who hold a similar point of view.¹ It is by fastening upon interactions that we can understand individuals' behaviour and action; otherwise we are caught up in the same dilemmas first faced by individualists of different kinds and even by Parsons, when he tried, after his analysis of the unit act, to move on and investigate broader features of social life.

More precisely, I regard the "dyad", already focused on by Simmel,² as

¹J. Turner, *A Theory of Social Interaction*, p. vii.

²G. Simmel, "The Dyad" (1908), in *The Sociology of George Simmel* (ed. by Kurt H. Wolff), Glencoe, Free Press, 1950, especially pp. 122-5. He was predisposed, however, to treat the dyad more substantively than analytically, the inverse of the case with Parsons, for whom it laid the ground for the examination of some of the most elementary aspects of interaction in general.

the most basic unit of sociological analysis, the most elementary form of interaction, which can be found in a clear-cut form exclusively by means of abstraction. Interactions in general can be dealt with in isolation as abstractions only, since it is their intertwining that constitutes social life.

Ego and **alter** establish "figurations", networks of relations and "interdependency", wherein the basic properties of social interaction are present. From this elementary relationship we can derive other figurations, making use of personal pronouns.³ "I" and "you", in the singular, comprise, therefore, the elementary dyad. Once the "you" or the "I" (which becomes "we") are treated as plural pronouns, there comes about an expansion of the interactive web. One person composing the "I" *vis-à-vis* two composing the "you" - or vice versa - establish a figuration wherein collective subjectivity is already present. An enlargement of the interaction entails, firstly, an expansion of both the "we" and the "you". And, with one further step, we arrive at the appearance of the "it", "she", "he" and "they" pronouns, by means of which other figurations may be assessed within the relation between ego and alter.⁴

As has been so often stated recently, the ego is constructed in the course of interactive processes. We must be attentive also to the difference between the way people are seen and interpreted by those with whom they interact and

See Donald Levine, *Simmel and Parsons: Two Approaches to the Study of Society*, New York, Arno, 1980, pp. 107-13.

³See Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1978 (1970), pp. 123ff.

⁴We will see further on that these figurations do not necessarily experience complete or even, in a border case, partial consciousness. At this elementary level this lack of awareness is, though not impossible, more unlikely to occur.

the way they reflect upon their own identity. Mead reserved the pronoun "I" - whereby the individual, the "me" is able to reflect upon him or herself - for this reflexive process.⁵ This insight can be widened to deal with the plural "we", if we expand one of the poles of the figuration in which now two or more individuals are included and exert a joint action. The "we", moreover, should be usually thought of reflexively, for, apart from moments of total conflation of the "I" and the "me", and thus of a direct identification of the individual with the group⁶, there is a certain distance between the singular self and the inclusive figuration in which it belongs. Otherwise we would be presented an utterly undifferentiated totality, with absolutely no space for individual autonomy, or exactly a "collective mind", which entails the problems I pointed out when discussing Habermas' view of "archaic" societies (in chap. 3.II).

I want at this stage to highlight the fact that when speaking of interaction I am referring essentially to **face-to-face** relations. These necessarily imply co-presence (although electronic media, telephones and the like have effected a certain change to this characterisation). Diverse relationships can be brought under this rubric, inasmuch as they share that basic trait. Face-to-face relations

⁵G. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, pp. 174ff.

⁶Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 273.

comprise interactions⁷ of a fleeting nature or of a more recurrent character. To discuss other types of interaction, further elaboration will be required.

II) PROPERTIES AND ELEMENTS OF INTERACTION

Certain properties need to be reckoned with when we address interactions. They will be taken up again when I introduce a more fully-fledged concept of social system. A **minimal** assessment of those properties must, however, be carried out now with respect to face-to-face interactions. We can say, thus, that interactions possess a "hermeneutic" and a "material" as well as a "space-time" dimension; they are endowed with a peculiar type of causality, namely a collective one; and they are often, though not necessarily, hierarchically stratified. As Georges Gurvitch noted, this sort of "micro" phenomenon is already "total". As Goffman put it, face-to-face relations constitute "a little social system".⁸ We may uphold Goffman's position to an extent, moreover, when he makes use of the differentiation between **situated** and **situational**

⁷Goffman's typology, developed for public spaces, is probably the best one available regarding face-to-face relations. He lists "gatherings" (two or more people directly in mutual presence), "situations" (when basic "mutual monitoring" in a spatial environment takes place) and "social occasions" (a "wider social affair", delimited in time and space). Alongside this, he speaks of "focused" and "unfocused" interaction. E. Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, New York, Free Press, 1963, pp. 18-9 and 24. See, for a transformed version of this typology, A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, pp. 70ff.

⁸Georges Gurvitch, "Problème de Sociologie Generale", in G. Gurvitch, ed., *Traité de Sociologie*, t. I, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958, p. 172; E. Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, p. 243. It is unlikely, though, that they are, in principle, more flexible than larger ones, contrary to Gurvitch's view.

aspects: whereas the former refers to anything occurring within the interaction, the latter points to what belongs exclusively to a specific situation.⁹ Provided we do not accept this distinction as a concrete and rigid one, for social life is created and reproduced in interactive processes, values, norms, language, stratification and so forth can be assessed with this **analytical** device in mind. Otherwise we revert to a problematic similar to that of the structuralist distinction between *langue* and *parole*, assuming a particular instance of the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness".

The hermeneutic dimension has received great attention: symbolic interactionists and dramaturgists, phenomenologists and ethnomethodologists have consistently pondered it. With synthetical ambitions, Turner amalgamated these contributions and proposed a set of elements that can comprehensively answer to this dimension.¹⁰ Humans use gestures to signal their respective lines of conduct and convey general information. "Imaginative rehearsal" and "deliberative capacity" are faculties with which competent actors are equipped, which they bring to fruition making use of their "stocks of knowledge" and operations of "indexability" that render precise the meaning of gestures in particular contexts. Role taking and framing, staging and ritualisation, claiming and accounting for the common world, are central processes in the course of interactions.

The "material" dimension, conversely, apart from important remarks on the role of peoples' bodies and interactive "settings", has remained unattended,

⁹E. Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, pp. 21-2.

¹⁰J. Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 74ff and 102ff.

whereas the organisation of space and time has received more of the attention it deserves.¹¹ Humans not only interact within "settings" wherein they "stage" their conduct. In fact, interaction must not be reduced to individual actors or even to the symbolic universe supposed and (re)produced in the unfolding of their relations. Interactive processes are constituted by material features of transformed nature - to start with by our bodies, but also by the manifold elements of lodging and clothing, transportation and instruments, all of which are intertwined with the behaviour of individuals. Space and time in natural terms also belong with the material elements mentioned above; the space-time constitution of interaction - that is how interactions receive configuration and rhythms of unfolding - should be, however, viewed as one more dimension to grapple with.

The more general features of social stratification are present in interaction. However, those actually present in face-to-face relations do not necessarily fit neatly into what could be taken abstractly (i.e. structurally - see below) to be those broader layers. Moreover other, specific inequalities are possibly spawned in the micro situation as such.¹² And, above all, in part due to the pervasive individualism and nominalism that reigns in "micro" theorising, that peculiar type of (collective) causality has not been scrutinised, even though it is presupposed by the discussion developed by writers such as Norbert Elias

¹¹See especially the commentary on Goffman's work in A. Giddens, "Erving Goffman as a Systematic Social Theorist", in *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*.

¹²E. Goffman, "The Interaction Order", *American Sociological Review*, v. 48, 1983 (1:17), pp. 5-6 and 14-6.

when examining groups' figurations.¹³ In order to avoid repetition, I shall leave these issues aside for a deeper conceptual analysis in later sections of this study. It is necessary to stress, however that common routines are often crucial for the reproduction of social relations and processes. Of course, the greater the preeminence and the higher the positions of the individuals in the social hierarchy, the less trivial the interactive settings and the processes in which they are involved. Their horizons of life and experience may be broader; their "everyday life" is likely to have distinct contents and influence in large measure other interactive processes. All the same, across history and social layers, the basic, general features of interaction are always, invariably present. A King and a plebeian live in different worlds, but their common social humanity is in part affirmed by this general ontological condition.¹⁴

Interaction hinges also on the motivations that establish the foundations of individual behaviour within them. Turner seems to be correct when he observes that the concept of **needs**, very much used by early sociologists, having gone out of favour, ended up being reintroduced into sociological theory by the "backdoor". In order to remedy this situation, he undertakes a typologisation of "need states" that energise interactions.¹⁵ He tells us about "needs for the group" and "group inclusion", which stem from expectations connected to "cooperative activities"; he speaks about "needs for self-

¹³N. Elias, *op. cit.*, pp. 80ff.

¹⁴A. Heller, *Everyday Life*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984 (1970), p. 6.

¹⁵J. Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 24ff.

confirmation", identity construction and sustenance; he draws attention to "needs of symbolic and material gratification"; he sheds light on our "needs for facticity", of "making sense of a common world"; and, finally, Turner brings to the fore our "needs for ontological security", a certain amount of predictability and possibility of anxiety management. At more concrete levels we could speak about political, economic, cultural, sexual needs and so forth.

How to grapple with the "double contingency" of interaction so strongly emphasised by Parsons, whose concern became the core of much of ethnomethodology's inquiry into how people guarantee a minimum amount of agreement about common goals, shared beliefs, meanings and perspectives?¹⁶ How to understand the recurrent Goffmanian appraisal of the cynical and manipulative behaviour of people during the staging of their interactive performances?¹⁷ Finally, how to explain why daily interactions do not demand the problematisation of the claims to truth, normative adequation, veracity and sincerity, which, according to Habermas, are continuously presupposed by actors in the enactment of their quotidian interactions (see chap. 3.II)? Not infrequently actors do not share the same goals and

¹⁶See chap. 5.II and H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, pp. 30-4.

¹⁷See particularly E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, passim. I do not mean by this to extrapolate from the middle class groups which, having relinquished the Protestant normative core of social commitments that informed American culture and were left with a more pliable ego and a straightforward utilitarianism, furnish the subject for Goffman's investigations - as A. Gouldner (*The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, p. 381) has, for example, insisted on. Goffman's studies have, however, challenged a lot of "normative" assumptions in sociological theory.

perspectives; in fact, they often adopt false pretences in order to attain their objectives. As Goffman observed,

Effective cooperation in maintaining expectations implies neither belief in the legitimacy or justice of abiding by a convention contract in general..., nor personal belief in the ultimate value of the particular norms that are involved.¹⁸

A solution to this apparent social paradox may be provided by the recognition that individuals with different needs, who come across and interact with one another, do not necessarily care for the actual intention of those with whom they deal with, inasmuch as they are able to secure the realisation of their aims. A certain degree of pragmatism seems to be unavoidable for a smooth passage of individuals through their daily interactive settings. This possible pragmatic acceptance of norms and patterns characterises an attitude that calls for classification under the title of **instrumental** or - to be fair to Habermas' categorisation - **strategic** action. It could be said to be rational, since actors can produce justifications for their conduct,¹⁹ but it can also be, as in this case, purely manipulative. At any rate, it does not imply a more thorough and consistent commitment of the actor to the values that structure the interaction; nor is it obligatory that actors are in fact deceived - contrary

¹⁸E. Goffman, "The Interactive Order", p. 5.

¹⁹J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 170-1.

to what Habermas presumes.²⁰ Although they may accept the other's "presentation", there is no reason to conclude that they naively take it at face value, even though they may refrain from making use of "discursive" procedures that might, as Habermas observes, check the actual meaning of the situation and the perspective of the participants. It goes without saying that certain relations, in particular those which involve trust, depend much more on the veracity of self-presentation and on more or less consensual constructions and the following of common norms. For all that, a general assessment of interactions demands a separation of "norms" of interaction from motivation and related dispositions to act in terms of interests and values.

The suggested claim that Habermas' notion of communication as **understanding** is only partially tenable (discussed in chap. 3.II) can be now more consistently substantiated. Social interaction by no means entails the necessity or desire of coming to any sort of agreement. Individuals in face-to-face interaction (or for that matter, in any type of interactive process) must adapt to or counter their partners' moves, joining or hindering them, even if they seek agreement. It should be clear, however, that "individuals sympathetically take the attitude of others present, regardless of the end to which they put the information thus acquired".²¹ Besides, it can be safely stated that we call a halt to our interpretations of others in daily life "...when

²⁰Idem, *Ibid.*, v. I, p. 141.

²¹E. Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, p. 16.

we have found enough to answer our practical questions", since daily attitude is in principle "pragmatically determined".²²

In order to address this issue more cogently, I want to introduce a clear analytical distinction between **rules** and **norms**. Accordingly, **cognitive** capacities must be neatly separated from **internalised** patterns. The forms of **sanction** connected to these behavioural regulations are, moreover, of different kinds.

Initially Habermas' treatment of this issue conflated these distinctions. Speaking of **role-taking** competence, he equated cognitive competence to the socialisation and the normative make-up of biological individual actors.²³ Progressively, as he drew more carefully upon Piaget, he came to categorise **interactive** competence in terms of a threefold differentiation - moral evolution, cognitive and linguistic competencies.²⁴ This did not mean, however, a possibility of actual sustained distancing of individuals from social normativity. Departing from a neo-Kantian perspective, Habermas still holds fast to a perception of norms as necessarily internalised by actors - he even suspects that there are no limits to the socialisation of human inner nature;²⁵

²²A. Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1967 (1932), p. 38.

²³J. Habermas, "Stichworte zu einer Theorie der Sozialisation" and "Notizen zum Begriff der Rollenkompetenz", in *Kultur und Kritik*, respectively pp. 118 and 195.

²⁴Idem, "Notizen zur Entwicklung der Interaktionskompetenz", in *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, p. 224.

²⁵J. Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, pp. 63-4. His commentators influenced by psychoanalysis denounce in this position,

what has essentially changed is that now he considers as possible that at a certain stage of the moral evolution of society, as the autonomisation of individuals advances they become able to **question** the validity of certain norms, counting on expanding reflexive powers.²⁶ This explains why he is not really willing and prepared to tackle issues such as those thrown up by Goffman.

The historically dated character of a perspective that stresses the internalisation of norms has been illuminated by Richard Morse, who has contrasted to it the Iberian tradition and shown how much that normative thrust owes to the Protestant notion of **conscience**, with the establishment of the new locus of morality and sovereignty in the individual. Parsons is an explicit example of this deep-seated presupposition.²⁷ In that other Western tradition, according to Morse, norms remained much more external to individuals. That normative tenet is pretty clear in Habermas' case, but by no means does this hold true even for more utilitarian offshoots of Western culture, as Hobbes and Parsons were cognizant of, notwithstanding the latter's eager espousing of the normative dimension so as to avoid a mere instrumental view of the social

however, a loss in comparison to the early Frankfurt School, for which a conflict between individual and society was in the last instance unbridgeable. See J. Whitebook, "Reason and Happiness: some Psychoanalytic Themes in Critical Theory", in R. Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity*.

²⁶Originally, see J. Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, p. 122; more recently, the whole "Einleitung" to his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (B. I, pp. 15-195) is dedicated to this issue, which comes out explicitly in p. 133.

²⁷R. Morse, *El Espejo de Próspero*, passim, but especially chap. 3.1.

order and interactive relations (see chaps. 1.II and 5). In any event, complete internalisation of norms should not be imagined universal or necessary.

Giddens' view of structures as rules and resources whereupon actors draw, and his perception of the importance of routine for social life, tips the balance in the other direction (see chap. 2.II). He seems to have been inspired by Wittgenstein's "anti-metaphysical propositions", according to which **meaning** is to be treated as an **external, purely linguistic phenomenon**,²⁸ and his definition of **rules** as merely **cognitive**.²⁹ His idea of structures is both too rigid in terms of the relation between model and reality and excessively fluid in terms of the actual internalisation of at least a certain set of norms by individual actors. Structures, however, should not be necessarily regarded as "paradigmatic"; that is they do not always pertain to a "virtual order", internal to actors and instantiated in interaction. They should be conceptualised according to a twofold classification: as internalised by actors, whereby they become part of their personality, and as directly existant as patterns that organise interaction, in extreme situations regardless even of all the actors involved in a given situation. This last proposition runs counter to Giddens' explicit insight.³⁰ Structures, in other words patterns of interaction, may be learned without commitment or internalisation as imperative norms; they may

²⁸See Ernest Gellner, *Words and Things*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979 (1959), pp. 18 and 25 (of the 1978 introduction). Although critical of normatively charged visions, Giddens has never provided a justification for his apparently total scepticism about the internalisation of norms by individuals.

²⁹J. Habermas, "Einleitung zur Neuauflage", *Theorie und Praxis*, p. 25.

³⁰A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Sociological Theory*, pp. 62-3.

remain completely external to the actor, however, purely rooted in "institutional contexts". The extent to which they are internalised and underpin motivations must, therefore, be regarded with caution and interpreted according to specific contexts and periods.

The meaning of the distinctions suggested above is, thus, clear. To the extent that the values that support an interactive pattern remain purely external to the actor, we are warranted to call them "rules" and "resources". The actor has appropriated them cognitively (although it should be apparent that this may happen in purely practical terms, without further reflection), but has developed no commitment to sustain them personally, although s/he may do so. Conversely, norms should be seen as patterns of interaction internalised by the actor. Not only does his or her (cognitive) **consciousness** takes account of them, for his or her **conscience** is filled with the values that underpin those patterns, although the actor may even be oblivious to his or her own constitution. They become **part of the actor's personality** - and, at least in some measure, they structure his or her own body.³¹ The mechanisms of sanction at work in the two cases are also distinct: as for rules, **social sanctions** are to be expected, and as long as the actor is not caught transgressing them he feels no discomfort; as for norms, **guilt** is the outcome

³¹P. Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, pp. 99 and 111ff. It is not clear, however, whether Bourdieu's allegiance to Wittgenstein's perspective, focused on **practice**, leaves enough room for reflexivity. Giddens, however, clearly distinguished between "practical" and "reflexive" consciousness.

when the actor violates the pattern.³² But, if individuals treat certain rules merely instrumentally, by means of their cognitive appropriation of a value or pattern, they can certainly utilise it simply as a resource, pretending or not to others with whom they interact that they take that value or pattern seriously, although they may, in fact, hold it in low esteem, not care for it, or even transgress it on the sly.

Of course, this sharp distinction is rarely observable in reality. At the analytical level, however, it is necessary to keep it in mind in order to synthesise contemporary insights and overcome their one-sidedness.³³ Habermas for example could better theoretically address his own recognition of the withering away of central aspects of normativity in the contemporary world, to the extent that "bourgeois consciousness" has become cynical.³⁴ This would, however, not need to be coupled with the far-fetched idea of a "motivation crisis" in late capitalism, which would have moreover the effect of producing a "legitimation crisis".³⁵ Once we do not necessarily regard rules as norms internalised by the majority of the population, we do not need to conflate those two dimensions. Instead of looking for a "crisis of motivation"

³²T. Parsons (*The Social System*, pp. 36ff) recognises these two types of sanction, but to collapse them into a direct association with norms, whose differentiation from cognitive elements is not intelligible enough either.

³³A typology of norms which runs in the same direction is found in Jack P. Gibbs, "Norms: the Problem of Definition and Classification", *American Journal of Sociology*, v. 70, 1965 (586:594).

³⁴J. Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, p. 168, and "Einleitung: Historischen Materialismus und die Entwicklung normativer Strukturen", in *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*, pp. 10-1.

³⁵Idem, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, pp. 105ff.

as correlative to a "legitimation crisis", he could not only accept their distinct character, but also more fully draw upon Held's remark that capitalism has survived less because people legitimise it and more because no clear alternatives have been available.³⁶ The relations and strategies - more centred or more disperse - of different groups and classes would thus be at stake.

III) SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES AND STRUCTURING

We have carried out a basic analysis of the properties of interactions, breaking them down into their constitutive elements and processes. It is necessary to go further and introduce a minimal definition of the concept of social system and state where it differs from both the concepts of interaction and structure.

Discussing Giddens' concepts of system and structure (in chap. 1.II), I accepted the clear distinction he establishes between them; on the other hand, I inverted the meaning of his concepts. Whereas for him structures have real substance and systems are just abstractions, I stressed that structures are, conversely, ideal scientific constructs, whilst systems consist of patterned relations with actual existence.

Elementary social systems are made up of patterned relations between individual actors. **The concept of social system encompasses the concept of**

³⁶On this, see, D. Held, "Crisis Tendencies, Legitimation and the State", in J. B. Thompson and D. Held, eds., *Habermas. Critical Debates*, pp. 189-93; and J. Habermas, "A Reply to my Critics", in A. Honneth and H. Joas, *Communicative Action. Essays on Jürgen Habermas The Theory of Communicative Action*, p. 281.

interaction. It exhibits all the properties I have attributed to those relationships, but has more extensive application being restricted to face-to-face relations. I accept, thus, Giddens' conclusions when he asserts that the dyadic interaction is already a social system - the basic one; but I depart company from him when he maintains that we should forbear any attempt to derive the properties of social systems in general from the dyad, since social integration in relations of co-presence ought to be demarcated from systemic integration, which calls forth a number of other questions.³⁷ The introduction of numerous other interactive layers, producing a complex tissue of interwoven social systems makes the tapestry concretely much more complex indeed. Nonetheless, the **basic properties** of social systems, which I have already presented and shall take up again in the course of the next chapter, are found already in dyadic systems. What is in fact absent from dyads is the property of collective causality, which Giddens is determined to negate. This property is yielded only when, but as soon as, we leave the dyad and insert another individual actor into the scheme. In any event, the relation between collectivities assumes increasing importance the further we go from immediate, face-to-face interactions.

Having resisted Habermas' split between system and life-world (in chap. 3.II), I have asserted the **universality** of the concept of **social system**, embracing the strand which is, in fact, more pervasive in sociological theory and which I have also deemed more flexible and adequate to its specific object. As for the concept of structure, against Giddens and structuralists, I

³⁷A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Sociological Theory*, pp. 73-4.

want to adopt Parsons' definition, which is close to Bourdieu's concept of model (see chaps. 2.II and 5.II). Structures are considered herein as abstract and useful models. As "snapshots" of social systems it might be interesting, rather than singling out one moment alone, to have different structural configurations of an unfolding relational setting: this may better reveal, through the comparison of different "stages" of the system, its situation at each of them.³⁸ Structures must, therefore, be built according to the researchers' comprehension as well as, to a certain extent, their interests, insofar as they select their material under the leverage of their own perspectives and goals, individually and collectively.

Weber's ideal type is to be dwelt upon.³⁹ This sort of ideal-type concept should be composed of the selection of typical features of reality, not the average characteristics thereof. If we follow this idea we may, however, end up with the construction of a structure that only incompletely does justice to the concrete level of homogeneity or heterogeneity of the given social system. This does not apply in the case of certain of his ideal-types - the transhistorical ones, such as the concepts of domination, which are analytical, rather than directed to historically concrete phenomena; in the case of those that refer to

³⁸As suggested by Patrik Baert, *Time, Self, and Social Being*, Aldershot, Avebury, 1992, pp. 6 and 33-4.

³⁹M. Weber, "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis", in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 190ff. He seems to be positively alert to the problem (p. 203). Ideal-types should be considered as basically descriptive devices, even in their nomological versions. Structures, therefore "fictitious" devices, should be distinguished from (analytical) categorial expositions of the sort Marx undertook in *Capital* - which partially inspires this study.

"historical individualities" - such as "capitalism" or the "Protestant ethic", wherein the application of those transhistorical ones is carried out - this problem comes to the fore, an intricacy of which Weber was only relatively aware. Hence, to understand a collectivity often requires more than its definition in terms of an ideal-type, and we should be attentive to the problems implied by Weber's methodological operations, which are actually much more sweeping than usually recognised, for a great many writers - despite sometimes their avowed positivism - make use of agendas similar to his, without, on the other hand, much insight into the problem.

Alfred Schutz highlighted the centrality of this process - which he labelled "typification" - in daily social life and prescribed a similar strategy to social science methodology.⁴⁰ Despite its obvious usefulness, this approach must be carefully employed. The more the subject to be grasped is heterogenous, the more serious the problem. To express the solution I envisage in one sentence, it could be said that the **structure** of one dimension of a social system should be manufactured by the researcher taking into account precisely the level of homogeneity or heterogeneity with which the system under his or her observation is endowed. Moreover, a reduction of the "practical logic" that guides the perception and conduct of actors to the "logical logic" of the social

⁴⁰A. Schutz, "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Experience and Thought Objects", in *Collected Papers*, v. I, pp. 17 and 27; "The Social World and the Theory of Action" and "The Problem of Rationality in The Social World" in *Ibid.*, v. II, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, pp. 13 and 17; and "Some Structures of the Life-World", in *Ibid.*, v. III, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1975, pp. 133ff.

scientist must be averted:⁴¹ the heterogeneity and contradictory traits of social reality must not be obscured by the models we design to grasp it. To be sure, specific discourses - such as legal ones⁴² - may persistently strive towards consistency, because of their own particular requirements, but this should not be seen as a universal characteristic of structures. In this precise case, it obtains as a consequence of the law being devised to effect the structuring of social processes.

Turner's discussion of "structuring" elements in interaction resumes Schutz's concerns, with particular emphasis on six dynamic properties: categorisations, which define the degrees of intimacy and the amount of practical, ceremonial and social content; regionalisation, that is the organisation of space; normatisation, which may change or become stabilised; ritualisation, implying definite patterns of conduct, which are repeated for the sake of a smooth development of interactions; routinisation, involving quite a great deal of Giddens' concept of "practical consciousness"; and stabilisation of resource transfers between participants in interaction.⁴³ We should probably add to those structuring ties which originate from identifications which ensue from the "socio-emotional dimension" of human groups. Durkheim was very keen on this element, which he saw as essential for the "solidarity" of collectivities. Contemporary social psychology has lent other and more contradictory and

⁴¹P. Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, pp. 144ff.

⁴²See A. Woodiwiss, *Social Theory after Postmodernism*, p. 117.

⁴³J. Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 150ff.

conflictual inclinations to this idea, stressing, however, the same point.⁴⁴ The notion of power, crucial for the relations between Elias' figurations (and which will be investigated in greater depth in the chap. 8), should also be added to these structuring processes.⁴⁵ Thereby we complement our discussion of interaction as face-to-face interactions.

Structurings obtain across the full range of social systems. We can think out, furthermore, typologies that insist on the more or less rigid character of the structurings of social systems and the vacuousness brought about by the powerlessness individuals feel in relation to them. This partially inspired Weber's perspective with regard to the "rationalisation" of contemporary society, with its resulting loss of meaning and freedom. It buttresses as well Habermas' theoretical approach to the "reified", "self-steered", "boundary-maintaining" economic and political systems in the West today, which are empty in terms of meaning. This despite his acknowledgement of social arrangements of power, legality and legitimacy that back them up - which, nonetheless, does not suffice to deter him from upholding the misleading separation of these systems from the life-world (see chap. 3.II). This also provides the rationale for Giddens' perception of the expansion of "abstract systems" (substantiated in "symbolic tokens" and "expert systems") in contemporary society and their disembeddedness from daily meaningful

⁴⁴E. Durkheim, *Les Formes Elementaires de la Vie Religieuse*, pp. 329ff and 602ff. For a contemporary discussion, see Susan Long, *A Structural Analysis of Small Groups*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 68-9.

⁴⁵N. Elias, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-8 and 92.

relations.⁴⁶ Individuals may feel powerless *vis-à-vis* powerful systems, although we should be aware of differentials in terms of the location of individuals and groups in social hierarchies and stratifications. In any case, systems cannot subsist without individuals and their manifold specifically human characteristics, which so strongly come out in the analysis of face-to-face interaction. Markets, for instance, do not conform to structurings which are altogether insulated from other processes of "social coordination". Nor are power relations. As "network" research has shown, market relations and power structures by no means forego highly personalised ties - even between competitive firms or within organisations. According to this research tradition, hierarchies (based on power), networks (based on personal bonds) and markets (universalistic and impersonal) are types of structuring of social life that seem to often concur with rather than oppose each other.⁴⁷

IV) FROM INTERACTION AND BEYOND

We have already discussed some possible ways of building bridges between the basic notion of face-to-face social interaction and what has been called, particularly in North-American sociology, **macro** concerns: "levels", "interaction chains", "duality of structure", uncoupling of life-world and system, and so forth, at least to an extent and often liable to indulge in

⁴⁶A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 80.

⁴⁷For an overview and case studies on this topic, consult Jeniffer Francis *et al.*, eds., *Markets, Hierarchies & Networks*, London, Sage, 1991.

individualistic approaches to action, have been envisaged as alternative paths out of the impasse characterised by the split between individual and society. Such a quandary befalls sociology even when interaction, wherein action takes place, is conceived of as entirely passive, which entails the permanence of a critical gap between the "micro" and the "macro" dimension, for we cannot extrapolate from situated interactions to more "macroscopic" systems, as one exponent of the former approach has trenchantly asserted.⁴⁸ Two strategies have often been pursued so as to close that gap, but they are patently insufficient. Those ventures either point to "macro" phenomena as emerging from the "aggregation" or "repetition" of "micro" ones, which may be seen as represented also by the view of social systems as nominal fictions; or else they impress on "unintended consequences of action".⁴⁹ Whereas the latter strategy allows for the introduction of other questions and for dealing with broader issues of the sociological tradition, the former, for all that has thus far been argued, is wholly unsatisfactory. Faced with this some authors resign themselves to waiting a solution to this thorny issue appearing only in the future.⁵⁰

Marx and Parsons had previously avoided that gap via the postulation of mediating subtotalities between elementary interactions and encompassing

⁴⁸E. Goffman, "The Interaction Order", pp. 8-9.

⁴⁹See K. D. Knorr-Cetina, "Introduction: the Micro-Sociological Challenge of Macro-Sociology: towards a Reconstruction of Social Theory and Methodology", in K. D. Knorr-Cetina and A. Cicourel, eds., *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology*, pp. 25ff.

⁵⁰J. Turner, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

societies or social systems. Afterwards the scene completely changed, with a regression to more limited understandings of social life ensuing, advances in other domains of sociological theory of course notwithstanding. To couple interactive orders with "figurations" of broader reach and/or more endurance, we must bear in mind two essential ideas: the mediation between the singular, the particular and the general, on the one hand, and the onion-like scheme of criss-crossing or encompassing social systems, on the other, which were proposed respectively by Marx and Parsons (see chaps. 4.II and 5.II). They will provide the foundations for an elaboration of the concept of collective subjectivity in connection to the issues underscored and developed by the contemporary sociological syntheses. Furthermore, they will contribute decisively to in my view a more pertinent notion of **totality**.

Habermas has a strong case when he puts forward his version of life-worlds as rather stable universes of meaning, with superficial plasticity. The same is of course valid for social systems, in the broad sense they receive in my analysis, in their totality. Giddens' stress on the openness of "structures" with respect to individual action sounds, thus, exaggerated, although his perception of the necessities of "ontological security" by individual personalities and the role of power and domination in social relations in the end contribute to a more sober picture. In any event, dialectics must be reckoned with, for not only diverse subjectivities influence each other in the course of the constitution of social systems, as those structurings attain only relative **totalisation**; that is only partially do they achieve the unification of

patterns - under one or some basic principles and whatever the heterogeneity of specific conducts derived from them - of social behaviour and relations.

Although somewhat narrowed by an individualistic bias, which stems from his affiliation to Husserl's phenomenology, a criticism made by both Giddens and Habermas (see chaps. 2.II and 3.II), Schutz's original insights have some advantage over a concept of life-world that puts excessive emphasis on its intersubjective constitution. To be sure, this is central to the definition of social and individual perspectives, stocks of knowledge and typifications. But his approach, dependent upon an internal analysis of consciousness, helps shift the focus to the partially idiosyncratic character of each individual's life-world, which is never totally the same as that of the other members of society.⁵¹ When we contemplate a collective life-world we should not lose track of its uneven and sometimes fragmented "structure", derived from biographical differences and the uneven distribution of social knowledge, which may look neat only through its hermeneutical reconstruction by the social scientist and its crystallisation in a model. The stability of life-worlds and the contingent achievements of individuals in interaction, stressed by Habermas, no longer demand a sharp distinction: since individuals share only incompletely a life-world, stability and contingency, necessity and accident, are not opposed to each other, but may be placed in a continuum of shared and non-shared elements. These allow for, or make more difficult, communication, and possibly agreement, between actors.

⁵¹A. Schutz, "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Experience and Thought Objects", in *Collected Papers*, v. I, pp. 11-4; "Some Structures of the Life-World", in *Ibid.*, v. III, pp. 116ff.

From the vantage point of this conception of totality, Mead's liberal concepts - so concerned with social consensus - are also to be met with caution, although it should be noted that he explicitly rejected any notion of "collective mind".⁵² Granting too much weight on societal structurings his concepts of play, game and, finally, "generalized other", assume a very compact form. He argued that the "attitude of the whole community", with all its conceivable and distinct roles, comes to constitute individuals' personalities.⁵³ He seems to detract from the possibility of misrecognitions and of the as a rule only partial knowledge singular actors and social groups possess about one another and their frequently mutual aloofness. This explains why, for instance, "...the more direct attribution of characteristics to particular groups by other particular groups often occurs more projectively than veridically", although it may end up superimposing identity traits to them.⁵⁴ For this reason, also within the symbolic interactionist tradition, Howard Becker can speak of "secret deviance" plus, in particular, the fallibility of processes of "labelling" deviance, which may fall upon people who have not

⁵²G. Mead, "Cooley's Contribution to American Social Thought", *American Journal of Sociology*, v. XXV, 1930 (693:706).

⁵³Idem, *Mind, Self, and Society*, pp. 153-5. In the last instance, the "generalized other" includes "...the universal functioning of gestures as significant symbols in the general human social process of communication" (p. 158). Money, one might suggest, is the form the "generalized other" assumes when human labour acquires an abstract form and takes on the aspect of a "universal equivalent", which levels out all the concrete differences of social labour - as theorised in K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. I, chap. 3. As to this, we can probably refrain from stressing the points made above.

⁵⁴S. Long, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

committed deviant acts or let go others who have done so.⁵⁵ This seems to hold true even if we refuse the conflation of deviance with labelling, or separate primary from secondary, socially categorised, deviance.⁵⁶ Thereby, in fact, the distance between individuals - with respect to the construction of their identity - and social systems is recognised.

Network research has had a lot to offer to a more complex and interesting picture of the relations between different social systems, sharing some basic insights with Marx and Parsons in regard to the multilayered and interactive aspects of social life. And although it had remained undertheorised hitherto, Harrison White has recently changed this situation. Cast in its own theoretical language, a number of his ideas are very close to the propositions developed herein: links between material and social space-times, identity construction, collective agents, organisational problems and heterogeneous systems are key elements in his reflections.

An excessively centred notion of social systems as actors, nevertheless, curtails the reach of some of the suggestions of his study. Although he correctly and engagingly perceives identities as coming out of the casual and contingent results of other processes, White directly associates them with control, which would be "...both anticipation of and response to eruptions in environing process", not as "some option of choice", but as an essential feature

⁵⁵Howard Becker, *Outsiders*, New York, Free Press, 1973 (1963), pp. 9 and 187-8.

⁵⁶See, respectively, Bob Fine, "Labelling Theory: an Investigation into the Sociological Critique of Deviance", *Economy and Society*, v. 6, 1977 (166:193); and Edwin M. Lemert, *Human Deviance, Social Problems and Social Control*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1972 (1967), p. 48.

of identities. These are as likely to "target" themselves as other identities for "control efforts".⁵⁷ Not by accident, he often refers to organisations in order to illustrate his ideas.⁵⁸ "Disciplines" are, in his view, successful attempts at control, whereas networks proper are composed of "ties", which represent failed attempts at control (his recognition of their specificity notwithstanding) and bring about looser connections between actors.⁵⁹ Despite numerous insights and a precise critique of the polarisation between individual and society,⁶⁰ his notion of collective agency - which remains underdeveloped - implies a type of subjectivity indebted to the Enlightenment's image of the individual actor. He goes no further than Marx or Parsons. His notion of **boundary** is excessively tight, to an extent at least because of this control-seeking conception of agency, in spite of its contingent accomplishment.⁶¹ For reasons I shall fully develop in the next chapter, the transformation of such a concept of collective actor is of fundamental importance. Thereby disciplines and ties might be placed in a continuum, instead of the latter being understood merely as an abortive configuration of the former. With this, we forcefully point to the question of the (de)centring of collective subjectivities.

⁵⁷Harrison White, *Identity and Control*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 9; see also pp. 312-4.

⁵⁸See his examples of triage in a hospital or of strategies of airlines companies: Idem, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-2.

⁵⁹Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 16-7, 22ff, 66-70, 78ff and 89.

⁶⁰Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 1 and 315.

⁶¹Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 128.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CONSTITUTION OF COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITIES

I) THE DECENTRING OF THE SUBJECT AND COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY

One of the outstanding themes in contemporary philosophical and social science debates has consisted of the dissolution of the classical figure of the subject instituted by the Enlightenment. Against that cherished entity a prospective theoretical decentring of the subject has been advanced. Some writers link this process of decentring to piecemeal developments in Western culture, which took place even before the complete emergence of this individual subjectivity: Copernicus showed that the earth is not the centre of the universe, Marx displaced the "human subject" from a non-existent centre of history, and Freud brought out the decentred character of the individual subject.¹ Others prefer to locate this changing nature of subjectivity within a more recent period: the constitution of individual and collective subjects - the state and the classes - and even, in some cases, their relative decomposition, prompted a questioning of that centred subjectivity.² Generally speaking we are presented with the puzzle of a fluid, contingent and possibly uneven subjectivity, with the operations that steer its constitution coming to the fore. Regardless of the underlying reasons for this development, the fact is that it delivered two closely bound results. The presumption of a naturally centred and absolutely sovereign identity has had its validity challenged; likewise, the

¹L. Althusser, "Freud et Lacan", in *Positions*, pp. 33-4.

²R. Bodei, "Strategie di Individuazione", *Aut-Aut*, v. 32, 1985, p. 98.

notion of a transparent consciousness was called into question; furthermore the intentionality of human conduct became question begging.

The necessity of rethinking that presuppositional universe does not imply, however, that we should join in the celebrations of what has been described as the "death of the subject". Structuralists, in France at first, trod this path, to which I want to oppose a genuine decentring, instead of remaining prisoner of the categories of conditioning and active causality, as they inadvertently are, despite their supposedly revolutionary intellectual achievements.³ For some, the idea was to leave behind a concentration on consciousness in order to discuss the achievements of the "epistemic" subject - and this meant that the individual empirical subject should be brushed aside.⁴ By and large, nevertheless, both individual and epistemic subjects tend to vanish in structuralism. Moreover, the very opposition between them evinces a conflation of the analytical and the concrete realms.

Throughout this study I have introduced, and shall still do so, different types of social systems, of collectivities: cities and regions, distinct kinds of organisations (from parties and schools, armies and hospitals, to nation-states and multinational organisations), families, social classes, smaller or bigger groups of more or less formal or informal character (school classes, migratory populations, scientific and ideological trends of thought), the concrete

³For an overview of the battle field at that moment, see Francois Dosse, "Le Sujet Captif entre Existentialism et Structuralism", *L'Homme et la Société*, v. XXV, 1991/3 (17:40); and P. Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, chap. 2.

⁴J. Piaget, *Structuralism*, pp. 138-9.

economic and the political systems, social movements of ethnic, gender, racial or general socio-political bases. To come to terms with their specificity and, simultaneously, weld them together in a single general concept of collective subjectivity, I have hitherto made a steady effort to **deconstruct** the concept of the subject to which contemporary sociology is heir, both in its individual and collective dimensions. I shall now seek out a **positive solution** to this problem.

The recognition of subjectivity as something fluid is of far-reaching consequences. The idea of centred subjectivity - well demarcated, closed and autonomous, built upon a clear identity, steered by a well-established decision-making nucleus - cannot be taken for granted any longer. A whole series of collectivities do not fit in such a narrow mould and even the ones that could be enveloped by this clear-cut concept do so in contingent terms only, for their centring as social systems is not given, being always under internal and external pressure. A social system **may**, and **may not**, be centred; it **may**, and **may not**, be well demarcated, closed and relatively autonomous; it **may**, and **may not**, manifest a clear identity; it **may**, and **may not**, be steered by well established decision-making nuclei.

Alongside this **internal** decentring of the subject, we must introduce an **external** decentring. This has been the thrust of Habermas' critique of the "philosophy of consciousness". Although he in essence refuses to address this issue at a collective level, the problem he has so forcefully confronted needs to be worked through at that level. As I have already emphasised, the rejection of isolated subjects as the main or even exclusive reference for social analysis

and the stress on the notion of interaction, should by no means eclipse problems related to identity and the constitution of subjectivity.

II) THE INTERNAL CONTINGENCY OF SUBJECTIVITY.

Sigmund Freud brought into the open the contingent character of individual consciousness with his penetrating challenge to the Cartesian subject, whereby he breaks it down into three components, the ego, the superego and the id. In addition, he asserted that psychoanalysis must not locate the being or essence (*das Wesen*) of the psychic in consciousness, which must be understood as a quality whose realisation is conditional.⁵ The Marxist concept of ideology, disclosing the blanket areas of individual and collective reflexivity, dwelled upon the same topic.⁶ On the other hand, structuralists and post-structuralists, with their fierce attack against what they see as the sin of "humanism", have more recently drawn attention to the precarious constitution of social identities, whereby a social system attains its collective self-awareness. Lévi-Strauss touches upon this unstable character of social identities when he conceptualises them as a "virtual focus", thereby rejecting a notion of "substantial identity" - since this would simply be a "logos" that

⁵Sigmund Freud, "Das Ich und das Es" (1923), in *Psychoanalyse. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Leipzig, Phillip Reclam, 1990, p. 301.

⁶See K. Marx and F. Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, in Idem, *Werke*, B. 3, pp. 26-7.

undertakes to capture the differences that in fact constitute the social space.⁷ Inescapably, the main victim of this double-edged critical charge against the idea of a centred subject is one of its associated tenets, the belief that intentionality is a requisite component of action. This means, thus, that the level of intentionality within social causation is relative, such that the so-called teleological causality of a subjectivity - individual or collective - depends on its level of centring, which is necessarily relative as well. This hinges on the level of decision-making capacity of the social system, on its definition of collective identity and self-recognition, and on its variable demarcation *vis-à-vis* other systems. Furthermore, the potential unintended consequences that stem from intended activity must be always accounted for.

The backdrop to Lévi-Strauss's discussion is in large an onslaught on the philosophical notion of "substance". Jacques Derrida is probably the major exponent of this campaign, which was to gather momentum with post-structuralism, featuring the notion (not exactly a concept, according to him) of **difference** - or *differance*, as he would have it - as its centre piece.⁸ If the dissolution of substantial beings in his writings in a sense shares with Marx the rejection of Western metaphysics, the limits of his approach in regard to the analysis of social systems are evident. Whereas Marx highlighted the importance of **social relations**, Derrida is only concerned with **structures of discourse**, an approach duplicated by many of his peers and followers.

⁷C. Lévi-Strauss, "Avant-propos" and "Conclusion", in C. Lévi-Strauss, ed., *L'Identité*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1983, pp. 11 and 332.

⁸Jacques Derrida, "La Differance" (1968), in *Marges de la Philosophie*, Paris, Minuit, 1972.

Moreover, as already highlighted, the problematisation of subjectivity, presented by post-structuralism as an absolute breakthrough, has been at stake since the heyday of German philosophical idealism.⁹ In fact, Marx's more consistent discussions on the obstacles to class unification can be credited in part to his acquaintance with this literature.

The syllogistic relation of the general, the particular and the singular, which is so crucial to Marx's notion of social class, as well as Parsons' onion-like scheme - despite his own commitment to a traditional view of subjectivity - are of help in furthering this notion of decentring. If we contemplate a social system as a network of subjectivities, each with its own logic and dynamic, it becomes clear that there should be no reason to expect, in principle, a centred subjectivity, regardless of the possible homogeneity or forced centring of the collectivity that theoretically and empirically are possible.

Nevertheless, we are confronted with opposite ideas to the contrary in the propositions made by some writers that have recently undertaken the elaboration of concepts to tackle the dimension of collective subjectivity. In Barry Hindess' and James Coleman's cases this is particularly strong: Parsons' collective actors loom large therein. But Mouzelis, who simultaneously recalls Marx's solution, is not too distant from them.

Attacking as "spurious" the notion that social classes, societies and "men" are actors, Hindess defends a minimal concept of actor, which encompasses both individuals and "social actors". Accordingly, an actor is a "locus of

⁹See J. Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, pp. 361-2, and Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, London, Verso, 1987, pp. 19-24.

decision and action" - a formulation through which we can immediately detect the author's debt to the philosophy of the subject. Actors depend not only on their social situation, but on the "styles of reasoning" at their disposal. Social actors comprise capitalist enterprises, state agencies, political parties, football clubs, churches, etc.¹⁰ In turn, his commitment to rational choice analysis notwithstanding, Coleman highlights the increasing role played by "collective actors" in contemporary society - actors which, despite continuous vacillations, he tends to identify as entities legally constituted. More clearly than Hindess, he is indebted to Parsons, although this is not explicitly recognised. His division of the actor's self (in "principal" and "agent") notwithstanding, he portrays a very centred subject.¹¹ Leaving room for some minor variations, with regards to our problem his actors are basically the same as Hindess', although they have criticised each other with reference to other questions.

Mouzelis' conceptualisation displays the peculiarity of bringing, at first sight at least, those two strands together. Moreover, he is explicitly concerned with the general sociological syntheses currently developing, pointing out the

¹⁰B. Hindess, *Choice, Rationality and Social Theory*, pp. 38-9, 44ff, 71ff and 103-4; *Political Choice & Social Structure*, pp. 5, 80 and 86ff.

¹¹James S. Coleman, *The Asymmetric Society*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1982, pp. 6ff; *Foundations of Social Theory*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990, pp. 28ff, 86, 367, 421ff, 503ff, 531ff. His general view of the theme of properties of social systems as well as his methodological standpoint definitely oscillate. See Idem, *Individual Interests and Collective Action*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press/ Paris, Mason des Sciences de l'Homme/ Universitetsforlaget, Toyen, 1986, p. 144; and "Properties of Collectivities", in J. S. Coleman *et al.*, *Macrosociology*, Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 1970, pp. 6 and 9; but also the formerly cited books, pp. 1-2 and 5ff, respectively. The central political issue he raises - the asymmetric relations between corporate actors and "natural persons" - is, nonetheless, critical.

lack of "collective actors" in both Habermas' and Giddens' writings. These are important insights, but his notion of actor is still excessively centred. On the one hand, he underscores Marx's notion of social class; on the other, however, he reduces it to its expression in terms of organisations, centred collective actors. The latter are even explained away, at a certain stage, as a "shorthand" device, which may have its underlying elementary reality spelled out. They are, furthermore, paralleled by single, though powerful, individuals, whom he calls "mega-actors"¹² - introducing a subreptitious displacement of the plane of analysis, inasmuch as these individuals, it should be observed critically, are units of those social systems, holding preeminent positions within them. Once more, the status of collective subjectivity is that of a centred and active entity, modeled after the individual as traditionally envisaged by the Enlightenment's philosophers.

In order to carve out an alternative form of coping with this issue in a sociologically precise manner, I shall make recourse to one of Robert Merton's most incisive, even though to some extent misunderstood, contributions. Discussing the role of functional explanations in social theory he proposed two distinct ways of conceptualising the processes that warrant such operations. **Manifest** and **latent** functions are the cornerstones of his proposition. The former rest upon intentional collective action and the latter bring up unintended consequences of action. Manifest functions imply **motivations** for the (individual) agents, whereas latent functions allude to non-intended objective

¹²N. Mouzelis, *Back to Sociological Theory*, pp. 48ff, 107, 130-1 and passim. The issue was hinted at in his former book, *Post-Marxist Alternatives*, pp. 22-4.

consequences.¹³ I shall remain in agreement with the idea, supported by Giddens, that functional statements are valuable only in contra-factual terms. However, Giddens' reduction of Merton's distinction to the "unintended consequences of action"¹⁴, will not be followed. If Merton relied too much upon functional premises, his formulation is, nonetheless, quite suggestive, with implications that cannot be coped with by the theory of structuration.

The causal efficacy of collective subjectivity does not depend on its conscious character, either in absolute or in relative terms. The impact of a given collectivity in social life may be completely unintended and, moreover, utterly overlooked and unacknowledged by its individual members. Of course, this is an extreme case, for it is generally at some intermediate point that most social systems have their "manifest" causality, that is their intended - teleological and final - causation. The properties a certain social system possesses may not be appreciated by its members, at least not completely, which with respect to collective causality is more likely the weaker and looser are its decision-making centres. The consequences of its impact upon its inclusive social system may remain unseen or faintly devised. And, more classical theme - for individual actors, though here met in a collective

¹³Robert K. Merton, "Manifest and Latent Functions" (1957), in *On Theoretical Sociology*, New York, Free Press/ London, Macmillan, 1967, pp. 104ff.

¹⁴A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 210ff. His position is moreover informed by a rejection of general law-like statements in the social sciences: Idem, *The Constitution of Society*, pp. 343ff. Despite his outspoken historicism, we must ask whether the theory of structuration - or, for that sake, any general sociological theory - would make any sense had it no universal bearings, let alone those presented with an "ontological" flavour.

dimension - it may bring about unintended outcomes when a strong intentional conduct happens to develop. This is the positive gist of Merton's proposals, generated in the effort to grasp the "formal" causality of a system upon itself, when stripped of its functional shackles and conveyed into the dimension of collective causality. **Collective subjectivity** corresponds to **collective practices**, which have specific systemic properties. Nevertheless, it should be also stated clearly that these recognised properties may work on the members of the social system which they "structure" as motivational factors, in other words, normatively, or as external regulative or coercive elements. In any case, intentionality varies in intensity, attaining diverse levels, according to the type of social system we refer to and to its concrete situation at any given moment.

It follows from this that dialectical thinking must accept its own transformation. It is plausible enough to suggest that its contemporary questioning is the result of the conclusion of a historical period. It seems certain as well that it is bound to remain as a means to generate growth through the overcoming of impasse situations and contradictions.¹⁵ It is necessary, however, to further develop this sort of consideration: the dialectical unification of subjectivity hinges on each social system intrinsic potential of centring. The extent to which this potential becomes effective is, in addition, contingent. Marx's notion of predetermined class unification is, therefore, untenable. The same problem appears in Parsons' compact collective actor. Whereas the former may not take place, the latter is excessively clear-cut to embrace the full array of actual social systems. In fact, people do not

¹⁵R. Bodei, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-9.

necessarily become aware of their collective subjectivity. We may, instead, have a dialectical development of utterly blind direction, although an extremely high level of centring and intentionality must be accepted as possible. In other words, to recall Freud's insight, the being (*Sein*) of a social system may or may not become conscious, known (*bewußt*) to its members. The concrete social system establishes the limits for this variation of awareness.

It is from Giddens himself that we can borrow the conceptual distinction between practical and reflexive consciousness (see chap. 2.II) so that we can deepen our understanding of collective subjectivity in relation to the perception of the so-called "lay members" of society. These concepts help bring out to what variable degree the individual members of social systems manifest awareness of the existence of the collective causality they yield and of their contribution to it. Of course, ideologies and the whole cultural tradition in which these individuals are immersed facilitate or hinder reflexive consciousness in regard to collective causality, although in the course of their daily life they have to grapple with it continuously, in practical terms at least. In societies organised according to liberal ideologies reflexivity with respect to collective subjectivity is usually very slight, substituted by utterly individualistic convictions. But this is not the universal case, by any means. Moreover, these doctrines have been under pressure for a number of decades, contradicted by opposing beliefs and by the practice of the working class movement (and, later on, by racial, feminist and ecological movements, let alone the so-called "ethnic revival"); these doctrines have been threatened, more recently, as the above discussion on Coleman evinces, also by the

increasing importance of corporations and other collectivities in contemporary social life.

The collective dimension of human action must be brought to bear on themes which, through the critical appraisal of Habermas' ideas, were formerly expounded (in chap. 3.II). Individual action, as assumed therein, necessarily entails communicative, strategic and instrumental aspects. Further issues must now be considered. The flow of the actions of the individuals who make up the units of the system may produce a clearly instrumentally, communicatively or expressively oriented collectivity. Otherwise, individuals may contradict one another, once they refuse - not necessarily upon articulate deliberation - to "agree", and therewith spawn a rather decentred collective causality. It may also be that, pursuing goals that unevenly emphasise those diverse aspects of action, individuals concur with the formation of a more centred collectivity, once their diverse purposes are not only non-contradictory, but also complementary. It may be, therefore, that a high level of centring, unintentionally or intentionally, comes about. Such a higher level does not, however, depend solely on this possibility. As we will see, structuring processes, being hierarchical, may favour extreme centring without actual willingness, at least in principle, of the individuals that comprise the system to strive for its goals, which often ultimately obtains.

Formal organisations, to which a great deal of study has been devoted in sociological theory, epitomise the highest possible level of centring that social systems can achieve. But the analysis must also proceed cautiously in this regard. Organisations are habitually defined by the quality of having explicitly

stated goals. Irrespective of these outspoken resolutions, however, the displacement of those goals may come about. Lip service may be paid to them, which are, hence, used as mere legitimatising symbols. Furthermore, the means supposed to implement aims may become ends in themselves.¹⁶ This was, for instance, one of the issues that stood out in Michels' misgivings about the fate of modern political parties, with the formation of oligarchical bureaucracies within them.¹⁷ On the other hand, the bounded character of organisations' "rationality" discloses the problems that beset their "optimal" level of centring: to difficulties in their functioning as "information processors" must be added advantages and disadvantages related to burdens on supervision, restrictions of choice, divergency of goals of subordinates from those of the organisation.¹⁸ This was, in part, the problem Lenin had to face when he defended the centralisation of command in the Social Democratic Party of Russia under autocratic rule, which should be, in principle, counteracted by maximal autonomy for its militants.¹⁹

¹⁶David Silverman, *The Theory of Organizations*, London, Heinemann, 1970, pp. 8-14.

¹⁷Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, New York, Dover, 1959 (1915), pp. 389ff.

¹⁸Herbert A. Simon, *Models of Bounded Rationality*, v. 2, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1982, pp. 405, 409-10, 420 and 449. This is a problem that has also secured consideration in "small groups", often experimental research. See Theodore M. Mills, *The Sociology of Small Groups*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1967, pp. 81-2.

¹⁹Vladimir I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (1902), in *Collected Works*, v. 5, Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961, chap. IV.

On the other hand, for instance, the consumers of a certain product are likely not to generate any intentional joint action, as is usually the case with consumers in general, who are scattered across the market.²⁰ In spite of that, their collective behaviour still has an impact upon those who are the producers of that commodity: whether they carry on buying it or vote with their feet and change for another brand does have consequences for that company and the more inclusive market situation. And this probably comes about as an utterly unintended consequence of their actions. The case of the concrete economic system, that is the economy of a city or a country, deserves consideration from this perspective.²¹ Although its level of centring is very low when it is institutionalised autonomously from the political system, it still exerts an enormous impact upon the other social systems that comprise the totality of social life - the political system, classes, families, peer groups and so forth. The changes in gear of free market economies, which had their extreme level of unintentional fluctuation in the West during the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries, are an example of that impact, with the violent and uncontrollable alternation of growth and recession being partially superseded only after new social relations permitted some mastery over these unintended outcomes. Of course, its concrete intermeshing with the

²⁰See Claus Offe, "Alternative Strategies in Consumer Policy" (1981), in *Contradictions of the Welfare State*, London, Hutchinson, 1984.

²¹It ought to be clear that I do not refer to the analytical element Parsons named the "economy", but to concrete social systems. A reformulation of that category will be endeavoured in the following chapter.

aforementioned (in chap. 6.IV) hierarchies and personal ties complicates the actual process of (de)centring.

The syllogism I have been stressing must, moreover, be connected to this discussion of "economic" systems. Alec Nove presses this issue home when he states that whereas Soviet socialism put excessive emphasis on the whole, economists such as Friedman and methodological individualism in general "go too far in the other direction":

*Pace, Mrs Thatcher, there is such a thing as society, and within it there are sub-units which are more than the individuals composing them: these could be the city of Glasgow, the Grenadier Guards, the rightly famous architectural ensemble of the Bath terraces, the Chicago symphony orchestra, the Munich city transport system, a botanic gardens, Marks and Spencer's, Sony, St Mary's hospital and so on.*²²

What else should we add to this characterisation, but the concept of collective subjectivity?

Speaking about social movements in general, in terms of "collective action" in the pursuit of "common interests", Tilly has also remarked on broad issues of "organization" - the extent to which "common identity and unifying structure among the individuals in the population" are generated - and,

²²Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism Revisited*, p. xii.

conversely, of "disorganization" - the decline of those two elements.²³ In this regard, we can observe that classes, races and genders, despite a pervasive though often contradictory awareness of shared attributes, rarely exercise a joint movement that would set in motion the whole of their individual units and sections. Rather, they usually share a reasonable, but not extremely high, potential level of centring. It may happen, however, that **all** the individuals and sections that comprise classes, races or genders decide to build precisely that centred and compact subjectivity. Leaving aside problems of organisation as such, it is more than feasible to suggest that such effort might, in fact, achieve limited success. Divergent perspectives and inclinations - for example: radical, socialist or liberal feminism, separatist or non-separatist feminism; class oriented or liberal working class programmes, communists and social-democrats; black-nationalism or integrationism, to cite just the main variants of these movements - may clash and in the end lead to fragmentation or, more likely, only partial centring. Musing on this sort of problem, Antonio Gramsci rightly suggested that

The philosophy of a period is not the philosophy of one or another philosopher, of one or another group of intellectuals, of one or another large part of the popular masses: it is a combination of all these elements which culminates in a certain direction, in which its culmination becomes the norm of

²³Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1976, pp. 7 and 54.

collective action, that is it becomes concrete and complete
(total) history.²⁴

Irrespective of the intention of the members of these movements, the final direction of that "culmination" - brought about by the unintended consequences of their action - may be quite heterogeneous and perhaps conflicting. Nonetheless, this does not signify the ineffectivity of these movements; on the contrary, such heterogeneity may represent, within certain limits and given certain conditions, an advantage, as we shall see later on in our discussion of the Protestant sects. As is well known, Gramsci was, within a Leninist perspective, concerned with the unification of the working class around the Communist Party, a purpose that most probably pays off in certain circumstances. Perhaps, however, the more decentred socialist parties envisaged by Rosa Luxemburg might be more effective in the long run, inasmuch as they cultivate the initiative of the masses, although, in the short run, they might face problems of organisation and strategy, as she recognised.²⁵

The face-to-face interactions discussed in the foregoing chapter (6.II) allow for similar considerations, since collective subjectivities are permanently formed within the daily routines upon which all sorts of social system are

²⁴A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, v. II, (text of 1932/5), p. 1255.

²⁵See Rosa Luxemburg, "Organizational Questions of Social Democracy"(1904), in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, New York, Pathfinder, 1970; and *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*, London, Merlin, n/d (1906).

dependent. Within factories, pubs, households or the the streets, people sustain or create relations of diverse kinds, and in so doing give continuity to or bring about figurations which can be more or less centred. The internal contingency of collective subjectivity is present across the whole range of social systems.

III) INTERACTION AND THE CONSTITUTION OF COLLECTIVITIES

Exceptional emphasis must be laid on the **relational** aspect of collective subjectivity. This is a truly general feature, which affects all the dimensions of social systems hitherto discussed, but also some that will still be considered. The identity of social systems, in particular, rests upon this interactive dimension, which has been underscored for individual subjects, but has not received, nonetheless, the same attention in the collective dimension. How much this has been an underestimated topic can be grasped by glancing at a very interesting point made by Homans. After discussing the impact of the environment upon the "Norton Gang", he realised the necessity of mentioning the impact of the gang in its town, Corneville: he then spoke of the money they spent in restaurants, their contact with politicians, the example they furnished for the creation of other gangs. But this issue was explicitly introduced merely for the sake of "logical completeness".²⁶ Thereby an important intuition, which might have led to other possibilities in his empirical investigation, was left aside.

²⁶G. Homans, *The Human Group*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951 (1950), p. 188.

Foucault dedicated part of his thought to the interactive dimension of collectivities, largely under the - although not openly admitted - influence of Marxism and its insistence on the relations between social classes. Two main problems are present in his pronouncements, in relation to the theory of collective subjectivity. He refused any idea of collective perspectives, which he saw as reproducing Durkheim's "collective conscience", preferring to it the idea of "subject positions", held by individuals, from which social subjectivities, with diverse levels of centring, emerge.²⁷ The "general theme" of his research was couched in the coordinates of the "different modes" whereby "human beings are made subjects". Those modes would be three: the scientific one, the dividing practices (as, for instance, the one between the sane and the insane) plus, at last, the form through which they are self-constituted (as in his late work on sexuality). If the former two point to structural effects, the latter brings up traditional reflexive individuals. No site was assigned to collective subjectivity in his picture.²⁸ His debt to, and active participation in, the process that brought about the aforementioned "death of the subject" is well known. Although in his last stage he retreated from his former position, Foucault consistently attacked the notion of the individual subject. His only alternative was, however, to fall back upon a notion of passive structures,

²⁷Michel Foucault, *L' Archeologie du Savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, pp. 126, 150, 160 and 254.

²⁸Idem, "The Subject and Power", in Herbert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, London, Harvester, 1982, pp. 208-9.

bereft as he was - in actual theoretical terms - of a real concept of collective subjectivity.

His monistic and all-embracing notion of power, which can be questioned for its intrinsically troublesome non-specification, has, nonetheless, an essentially **relational** character, for the operation of both its dominant poles and "points of resistance".²⁹ It is, besides, constitutive, and not merely repressive. We can, therefore, harness his insights to build a theory of collective subjectivity. He broached a fundamental insight into this relational dynamic when he brought out what may become unintended consequences of this exercise of power: the influence a social system exercises on the constitution of another one implies a movement of self-constitution. His comment upon the unfolding of bourgeois civilisation is rather telling:

One could say that the strategy of moralization ...of the working class was that of the bourgeoisie. One could even say that it is this strategy which defined them as a class and enabled them to exercise their domination.³⁰

²⁹M. Foucault, *L'Histoire de la Sexualité*, v. I, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, pp. 124ff; "The Subject and Power", pp. 217ff. I would put one of his observations differently, saying that power is subjectivity, but only relatively intentional, rather than the other way round.

³⁰Idem, "The Confession of the Flesh", in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings by Michel Foucault, 1972-1977*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 203.

It is clear that these two dimensions are closely interconnected, since the external relational character of power implies an interplay with its internal workings. As Michael Mann has put it, dialectics is central to the relation between the distributive (external) aspect of power and its collective (internal) workings.³¹ In this section we have been dealing with the first one; the other will soon be tackled.

Recent discussions of, on the one hand, organisations and communities, plus, on the other, social movements and the constitution of the "social", have focused on the interactive dimension of collectivities, suggesting some theoretical pointers, even though one cannot say that they achieve a thorough success. Whilst the discussion advanced above aimed at shedding light on the internal character of social systems, thereby on their inner decentring, the following analysis will tend to stress the relational features of this process, which is bound to throw up some more aspects of that first dimension.

"Network" analysis, ranging from organisations to community and peer groups has been greatly concerned with this sort of issue: the relation between its "actors", particularly with respect to the search for resources on the outside, has become more important than their own attributes, involving ties of dependency and power.³² Organisations, for instance, negotiate, struggle and

³¹Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, v. I, p. 6.

³²Peter V. Marsden and Nan Lins, "Introduction" and Barry Wellman, "Studying Personal Communities", in P. V. Marsden and N. Lins, eds., *Social Structure and Network Analysis*, Beverly Hills, Sage, 1982, pp. 9 and 63-4; and Joseph Galaskiwicz, "Interorganizational Relations", *Annual Review of Sociology*, v. 11, 1985 (281:304).

cooperate, social change being brought about in part through their interaction.³³

With great appreciation of the relations between collectivities, Alain Touraine has produced an original formulation - expressed in the concept of the **historical subject**. It may be referred to organisations, but he is at pains to emphasise social movements as its main incarnation - with the resulting formation of classes, in a loose sense. They are in the centre of the struggle for the particular definition of the overall **historicity** (the core values and orientations) of each historical period.³⁴ His is a position that stems, very modified as it is, from Marx. He is keen, however, to sketch a more diffuse and decentred notion of the subject, which basically represents "...the principle of unity and signification of a historical system of action, which cannot ever be identified with a concrete actor...".³⁵ Regardless of the validity of this general postulation, his broader notion of the subject is not precisely conceptualised.

With a similar concern and from a "Post-Marxist" perspective - i.e. under the influence of post-structuralism, but also of Marxism - Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have advanced some interesting ideas (the more strictly political features of which I shall not dwell upon). A strong idealistic element

³³Göran Ahrne, *Agency and Organization*, London, Sage, 1990, pp. 40-1, 55 and 91-2.

³⁴A. Touraine, *Sociologie de l'Action*, Paris, Seuil, 1965, pp. 9, 56-61, 77, 121 and 148; *Production de la Société*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, pp. 11, 16 and 39; *Le Retour de l'Acteur*, Paris, Fayard, 1984, pp. 15, 31-5, 60 and 102.

³⁵Idem, *Sociologie de l'Action*, p. 148.

can be identified in their work, as it seems derived from an excessive stress on the **signifier** at the expense of the signified, an inclination they borrow from Lacan. They do not realise that, if the projects social collectivities develop, and which they strive to make come true, play an essential and probably increasingly pivotal role in social life, they make sense only within certain limits of **plausibility**, beyond which they become pointless. There are limits to the fluidity of meaning a certain signifier may assume and the efficacy of ideologies depends on how much they are able to answer the problems posed in other dimensions of social life, irrespective of the extent to which power and other social relations may contribute to guarantee the at least partial acceptance of an ideological formation.³⁶

Having pointed this out, it is important to recognise their very interesting insights into the interactive aspect of the constitution of collectivities, although even here some problems can be detected. They start with a reconstruction of

³⁶For the idea of "plausibility", see Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos, *Paradoxos do Liberalismo*, São Paulo, Vértice/ Rio de Janeiro, IUPERJ, 1988, pp. 11ff. The consequence of the no-longer sustainable character of an ideological formation which however remains in place may be the production of a "hyper-reality" - see A. Woodiwiss, *Postmodernity USA*, London, Sage, 1993. See also, for a critique of Laclau and Mouffe, his *Social Theory after Postmodernism*, pp. 64ff. They try to ground their position more firmly in their quarrel with Geras, moving the battle field to an opposition between idealism - in whose tradition even Marx should be included - and realism. Discourse would be prior to the differentiation between linguistic and non-linguistic elements, whereas concrete discourses would constitute objects amongst others. In answering Geras' misguided statement on the autonomy of an objective world, they do not manage to perceive the necessity of grounding a definition of the conditions of possibility (which should be coupled with the above mentioned category of plausibility) of those concrete discourses. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies", in E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, New York/ London, Verso, 1990, pp. 100ff. For the critic's position, check Norman Geras, "Post-Marxism?", *New Left Review*, n. 163, 1987 (40:82).

the evolution of Marxism in terms of the increasing role the concept of hegemony came to play in this tradition so as to grapple with questions of contingency and multiple causation. They arrive at the conclusion that, in the modern world, differently from what was supposed to be the case until then, "unfixity has become the condition of every social identity"; social subjects, with no *a priori* projects and interests (such as a pretended essential inclination the working class would have towards socialism), "overdetermine" each other, mutually influencing the constitution of their identities.³⁷

At this stage their conceptualisation becomes rather elusive. Advancing the key category of **articulation**, they suggest a relatively prior existence to the elements that are articulated, but at the same time postulate that they are not elements of an "underlying or sutured totality". It is **discourse** that creates the differential positions that elements occupy in a relational system and, consequently, in a totality.³⁸ The overreliance upon the linguistic dimension is evident in this passage, let alone the tendency to impose the reality of the model on reality itself, to echo Bourdieu's critique of structuralism. This should be extended even further, though, for they manage to reduce the whole of society to the structural effects of discursive formations, despite the complete freedom to shape reality their collective subjects seem, henceforth, to enjoy, and the authors' stress on the interactive moment of collective identities. They are unyielding when they state (following Foucault) that the

³⁷E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*, New York/London, Verso, 1990 (1989), pp. 85-7.

³⁸Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 93-107. Here the overloading influence of Saussure and Derrida can be seen.

category of "subject" is entirely based on the notion of "subject positions within a discursive structure".³⁹ Social relations entirely vanish with this sort of statement.

Notwithstanding the relevance of ideas such as "equivalence chains", that would articulate distinct collective subjects in a common discursive field, opposed to one another, the separation they produce between objective "real oppositions", conceptual "contradictions" and "antagonisms", sounds rather empty. The latter, which cannot be "said", only "shown", are necessarily **external** to society, never internal: "...they constitute the limits of society", its "impossibility of fully constituting itself".⁴⁰ Afterwards, Laclau expanded on this idea, asserting that with the concept of antagonism we are faced with a "constitutive outside", which blocks the full constitution of the identity of the "inside", rejecting once more Hegel's attribution of contradictions to reality, for these would be internal to the concept, leaving no room for contingency.⁴¹

We can start by challenging the sharp distinction between inside and outside. Not only the boundaries of social systems are frequently blurred, which ought not to be forgotten when we build models to analyse social processes, but one should also ask how a perspective that pretends to rest upon the notion of social interaction between collective subjects is comfortable with

³⁹Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴⁰Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴¹E. Laclau, "New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time", in Idem, *op. cit.*, pp. 17 and 26. The issue is even more problematic because of his strange statement that identities are relational, and that **all** relations are internal. See Idem, "Theory, Democracy and Socialism", in *Ibid.*, p. 207.

this sort of idea. What is a social system - wherein different subjectivities constitute their identities, by the same token constituting the identity of this inclusive totality - but an entity whose outside and inside can be defined only in terms of the referential we are dealing with, insofar as these two dimensions are always present, often intertwined? Are Laclau and Mouffe speaking about the construction of subjectivities that oppose each other in the contemporary social setting defined in terms of the nation-state, therefore incorporating even the relative arbitrariness of this historical construction, or do they take it in substantial terms, embracing a perfectly traditional concept developed by metaphysics, that of an foreclosed identity? Are they delimiting all the possible definitions of meaning for a community in terms of its boundaries, with the constitution of societies as monads?

Contradictions, thus, providing they are not forced into the straightjacket of a triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, are to be considered as internal to social systems, as much as other sorts of relation. Especially if we detach the notion of social system from its passive overtones, this idea takes on a more relevant meaning, for we are talking about collectivities that develop a specific sort of joint movement - of conflict, collaboration or indifference - rather than the sheer effect of structural determinations, regardless of whether these are of material or linguistic type. This is why Laclau's rejoinder to Mouzelis is so unconvincing as well, since the former's theorisation is not comprehensive enough to come to terms with the whole of social life.⁴² Moreover, they

⁴²Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 222. For the critic, see N. Mouzelis, "Marxism or Post-Marxism", *New Left Review*, n. 167, 1988 (34:61).

basically address the constitution of social movements. It is certainly not because these are unimportant that I advance this last remark; on the contrary, they should be included in a wider theoretical mould and find their specificity within this more general picture.

IV)STRUCTURES AND CAUSALITY

In the preliminary remarks to his studies on world religions, Weber proposed the question of the "universal historical problem" that besets a "son" of the European culture: which "chain of circumstances" (*Verkettung von Umständen*) has led to the appearance of cultural phenomena in the West with "universal significance and validity"?⁴³ He was, of course, speaking of rationalisation processes, and furthermore he was especially concerned with the development of (rational) capitalism. It was therefore necessary to study economic conditions in order to explain this phenomenon. But this would not suffice on its own: another "causality complex" (*Kausalzusammenhang*) should be sought, inasmuch as the origins "economic rationalism" are dependent upon specific types of ways of life (*Lebensführung*). His studies of world religions aspired to an understanding of which specific factors had furnished, through a peculiar "content of faith", the "conditions for the origin" of an *ethos*, an "economic disposition", which brought the Protestant ethic to the fore.⁴⁴

⁴³M. Weber, "Vorbemerkungen" (1904), in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1922, p. 1.

⁴⁴Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 12-5.

Comparison was the basic procedure he used to make out what particularities belong to Western evolution.

In his historical investigation, Weber abided by his more general comments on the role of **meaning** in the explanation of human conduct and even on rationality as a yardstick for that process of understanding,⁴⁵ issues sharpened by the historical context upon which he fastened, in which the individuation and rationalisation of conduct assumed prominence. He also remained true to his belief in the unavoidable selection of angles and materials investigators carry out when projecting and doing research, in accordance with their own situation and values. And he lent enormous weight to his previous observations on the role of "mental experiments", "objective possibilities" in history, ideal-types construction and the isolation of possible causal elements.⁴⁶ The Protestant ethic was held responsible for triggering off processes of rationalisation and economic development: its potential development could have occurred elsewhere, but did not, since these factors were absent. The secular developments of that ethic maintained those processes and enhanced them.

Putting forward the analysis of "concomitant variations", Durkheim went in fact further than Weber and presented this method as the main and almost exclusive one for sociology. Lacking possibilities to execute real experiments, sociologists need to employ an alternative, "indirect experimentation", that is,

⁴⁵See Idem, "Soziologische Grundbegriffe", in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*.

⁴⁶Idem, "Objektive Möglichkeit und adequate Verurachung in der historischen Kausalbetrachtung", in *Ibid.*, pp. 266ff.

the "comparative method".⁴⁷ He quickly dismissed Comte's recourse to historical reasoning, since he was not interested in the sort of problem - the direction of human progress in general - which that philosopher wanted to grasp. Convinced that to one effect only one cause corresponds, he imagined that it was possible to isolate variables that could explain "social facts", although he did not naively expect a perfect initial match between those two elements, for unknown causes and effects are bound to remain hidden in the course of research.⁴⁸

In Weber, the efficacy of causation often took the form of intentional causation, directly related to the attribution of meaning, by individuals, to the world and to their action. He combined, thus, the identification of factors which, methodologically, seem to have a factual, external nexus only - e.g. capitalism and the Protestant ethic - but did not detach it from the actors' intentional behaviour. Nevertheless, his position was not clear as to what constituted the internal causal relationships: his neo-Kantianism induced him to affirm the chaotic character of the world, simultaneously, however, with the underscoring of general causal relations imputed to reality by the researcher himself.⁴⁹ His was, therefore, a dubious answer to Hume's view of causality as a plain association realised by the observer between phenomena with

⁴⁷E. Durkheim, *Règles de la Méthode Sociologique*, pp. 124-5.

⁴⁸Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 128-31. As is well known, he also contrasted cause to function. For reasons repeatedly stressed above I do not accept the second element as more than methodologically useful.

⁴⁹M. Weber, "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischen Erkenntnis" (1904), in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*.

absolute external connections (see chap. 1.I). Durkheim also brought the social facts that constrain individuals, identified via the method of "concomitant variations", to bear on their conscience and consciousness: as aspects of the "collective conscience" they determine the behaviour of actors.⁵⁰ His proclamation of one cause corresponding to only one effect could hardly leave other doors open.

There is an array of important ideas in those recommendations. Yet I think that it is necessary to clarify some of their insights and then draw them close to the positions I have hitherto elaborated. We have discussed at a certain stage (in chap. 6.III) the role ideal-types, as structural models, play in the process of research. To an extent, i.e. ideally, they duplicate the processes of structuring of social life. They were deemed, following Weber and Schutz, fictitious structures, useful as models for investigation. The Protestant ethic, as the former precisely stated, was an ideal-type, a historical individuality; its factual existence could not be separated from individual consciousness and the relations between actors, which, *pace* his misguided methodological individualism, Weber did not altogether neglect. Durkheim's case is different, since, affirming a "collective conscience" over and above individual actors, he committed the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness", imputing to reality what ought to be seen as simply a theoretical structure. On the other hand, his collectivist bias prevented him from ascribing that causation to individuals - and only then to groups, as did Weber. Instead, certain sections of the

⁵⁰This is especially clear in E. Durkheim, *Le Suicide*, Paris, Alcan, 1930 (1897), especially pp. 143ff.

population were directly endowed with propensities to act, which constituted a reified "habitus".

We must, however, stress once more that collectivities cannot be reduced to individual actors, for they have properties of their own, which must not be reified. They exist only **in** and **through** interaction, although they become embodied in institutions, cultural works, machines, etc. - their reproduced patterns plus hermeneutic and organic aspects, which will be examined in the following chapter. When we focus on comparisons between social systems, in an attempt at grasping which distinctive factors are at work, producing processes within them and their interactive systems, what comes under inspection are, in fact, their properties. These properties exert sway, nevertheless, only through the impact of the collectivities they constitute. Otherwise we would just have inert properties. All in all **collective causality** is of crucial significance.

Therefore, Protestant sects should not be overlooked when the Protestant ethic is contemplated: that cultural formation was nothing but an element, a property of their constitution. Nor when we concentrate on the impact of socialist or ecological, domestic or scientific practices, must social movements, the family or scientific communities, be disregarded. The same holds true with regard to the influence of Western economies over the world: what is at stake is the impact those interactive networks exercise upon the other economic systems, not the influence of a **thing**, irrespective of how reified those systems are. We are speaking, thus, of the ascendancy which - for different reasons, counting on coercion or not - certain collectivities happen to enjoy, in the

cultural, economic, political or whatever aspect of social systems. This line of argument is at variance with Habermas' sharp separation between the theory of evolution and history (see chap. 3.III). The structures of learning he fastens upon are just useful research models, but nothing else, and cannot be disconnected from collective subjectivities, despite even their solidification in institutions and the like. Structuralist influences are valuable up to a point only.

In all these cases the internal contingency and the external features of the constitution of collective subjectivities must be given due attention. They mediate between individual intentionality and encompassing social systems. I shall take up later the impact of Protestantism in the creation of modernity. The question of collective subjectivity and its relative (de)centring will be pursued after the efforts of sociologists and historians, and the problems thus far discussed will receive a concrete illustration.

CHAPTER EIGHT

COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY AND MULTIDIMENSIONALITY

1) PERSPECTIVES AND ORGANIC CONSTITUTION

I shall undertake now a discussion of collective subjectivities' **hermeneutic dimension** and of what will be called their **organic constitution**. Conceived overall, the whole comprising the hermeneutic dimension and the organic constitution, plus the **space-time dimension** to be introduced below, furnishes what could be declared the "formal" causality of social systems, that is the conditions whereby they are (re)produced and changed. The **multidimensionality** of social systems, recently underscored by Alexander¹ - who handles it with reference to the "conditional" and the "normative" aspects of individual action as well as within a renewed version of Parsons' AGIL scheme - will be thereby assessed.

Mead is better known for the concepts he forged to analyse the constitution of one's identity in terms of the interactional aspect of social life, but his work contains some formulations that pertain to the hermeneutics of collective subjectivity. According to him, when the "self-conscious" human individual assumes the organised social attitudes of the social group or community to which he belongs, he enters into relations with other social groups, through participation in, and formation of, his own social group. In modern, complex societies, these groups are of two types:

¹J. C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, v. 1, pp. 65-6, and *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*, passim.

Some of them are concrete social classes or subgroups, such as political parties, clubs, corporations, which are actually functional social units, in terms of which their individual members are directly related to one another. The others are abstract social classes or subgroups, such as the class of debtors and the class of creditors, in terms of which their individual members are related to one another only more or less indirectly, and which only more or less indirectly function as social units....

This sort of insertion into social relations puts the individual in contact with several other individuals. This is how people attain their individuality, recognising the common perspective of the community, in a two way process.²

I have criticised Mead above for his excessive emphasis on the role of society in the maturation of the individual self - even though he positively rejected the idea of group mind as pre-given *vis-à-vis* interactions; he lacked as well an articulate concept of collective subjectivity. Substantively, however, in the dimension of their hermeneutic constitution, the notion was present. The twofold differentiation he sketched should, furthermore, be considered almost in terms of ideal-types, for concrete social systems might be placed, even along their "life time" span, in more intermediate positions in relation to the

² G. Mead, *Mind, Self, & Society*, pp. 158-9; and also "The Objective Reality of Perspectives" (1932), in *On Social Psychology*, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1972, pp. 346-8.

two kinds of unit he portrayed. It is not difficult to realise that his distinction refers, at least partially, to two sharply defined levels of centring of collectivities, which, in general theoretical terms, should be avoided. The idea he advanced, despite these drawbacks, is essential for the characterisation of the hermeneutic dimension of social systems. It sustains the collective identity of a social system, to whatever degree it happens to emerge, informs its objectives and goals, and mediates its interactions with other collectivities.

We must concurrently bear in mind the very common circumstance, asserted by Habermas (who harks back to the tradition of the critique of ideologies), that it may be imperative to go behind openly stated perspectives, in search for a "deep" hermeneutic that makes clear the meaning behind the meaning. Understanding and explaining must travel together, for other factors such as power and domination must be reckoned with. In fact, those processes may be completely overlooked by individuals and groups, insofar as the internalisation of norms very often entails psychological "mechanisms of defense", with repression and rationalisations resulting for individuals, which block for them any possibility of considering their own hidden motivations.³ These motivations, norms and mechanisms receive expression in collective "habitués" and ideologies.

We should be wary of positing a general and overarching perspective in the constitution of a social system. We would be better off were we to take into account a relatively more heterogeneous constitutional formation. It may

³J. Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interest*, p. 298, and "Die Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik", in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, p. 345.

in fact be the case that a social system is really homogeneous in terms of perspectives, which are evenly shared by its members. It may, on the other hand, be that heterogeneity and differentiation are writ large - with, nevertheless, a common overall pattern prevailing and establishing the general lines along which that heterogeneity develops, whereby the different local perspectives that constitute the internal or perpendicular social systems that comprise the units of the inclusive or semi-inclusive one should be seen as specifications of the more general perspective.⁴ Conversely, the partial perspectives may be actually sharply dissimilar, sharing very little common ground - other processes would, therefore, contribute to the permanence of the system. What is more likely to happen, though, is that the hermeneutic constitution of concrete social systems occurs somewhere in between those extremes of heterogeneity and homogeneity. And, of course, the movements of specification and generalisation work as much from the bottom to the top as the other way round, which was not taken into consideration by Parsons, who was keen on highlighting the first process. Once again the dialectics of the general, the particular and the singular must be brought to bear. We should especially recall to mind that the life-worlds we discussed in relation to Schutz and Habermas (in chap. 6.IV) are, in fact, another way of speaking of this

⁴See T. Parsons, "A Tentative Outline of American Values", in R. Robertson and B. S. Turner, eds., *Talcott Parsons, Theorist of Modernity*, pp. 37ff; "An Outline of the Social System", in T. Parsons *et al.*, *Theories of Society*, p. 45; and *Societies*, p. 23. We find in Foucault the same sort of intuition, first more directly connected to structuralism and then when he drew upon his former ideas to deal with the constitutive and juridical aspects of power, arriving at the notion of *dispositif*. See, respectively, M. Foucault, *L'Archeologie du Savoir*, passim, and *L'Histoire de la Sexualité*, pp. 109, 117-8, 185-6, 190 and 207.

hermeneutic dimension. As we have seen previously, even if a general pattern is shared by a collectivity, a certain amount of internal differentiation is likely to be displayed.

In any case, **intellectuals** are of paramount relevance in the conformation of social systems' hermeneutic dimension as well as in regard to other aspects of social life.⁵ Specialists in the domain of mental labour are extremely important; if we accept Gramsci's radical formulation of intellectual activity as the domain of every individual, reflexivity - with its intended and unintended consequences - becomes an even more striking feature of social systems once these are conceived of as systems of action. Thereby we should be able to reject once again, from another angle, the reification of collective subjectivity, with respect now to the theme of reflexivity.

The interaction between collectivities - of collaboration, conflict, dominance or subordination - is an essential aspect of the process of formation of a social system's perspective. I have earlier (in chap. 6.II) considered the interaction between collectivities with respect to the "labelling" of deviance; national, continental and civilisational identities should be regarded in the same connection. Not only may they directly influence another system - as in the case, for example, of direct military conquests and the ensuing possible reformulation of social life and cultural patterns; but a more diffuse contact is also common, as when cities or nation-states compare themselves with other cities or nation-states and draw upon and/or reject, either partially or

⁵See A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere* (texts of 1930/2), v. I, pp. 474ff and v. 3, pp. 1513ff.

thoroughly, the features that define their hermeneutic dimension, and in so doing constitute their own.

Countries like Russia, Japan or those that comprise "Latin" America are cases in point, but England, France and Germany, or the European Community, participate in the same interactive mutual constitution of societies. After its emergence as the dominant pole in the world, the position of Western culture has evidently become of particular significance in relation to this problem.⁶ Once again intellectuals are key agents in the construction of these perspectives. We can in fact say that the social sciences as whole have been characterised by a Western slant. This is often implied in reflections which show their connections to the societies in which they emerged (as in the case of this study). But this should show as well how much they owe to their peculiar insertion in the process of globalisation developing in the moment of their emergence. The outcome of this process of formation makes once more manifest the extent to which "understanding" often means misunderstanding in the interaction between collectivities. This is conspicuous in the case, for instance, of so-called "archaic" societies, which have been depicted in quite idealised ways. This expressed, according to one commentator, the "nostalgia" that pervaded the West at the onset of its process of "modernization":

In other words, while Western imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involved the political

⁶I have discussed this question, as for "Latin" America, in J. M. Domingues, "A América. Intelectuais, Interpretações e Identidades", *Dados*, v. 35, 1992.

and symbolic incorporation of African and other territories into the national identities of the imperialist nations, it also involved the attribution to primal societies of cohesive functionality. That exercise actually combined a modernist notion of function with a nostalgic injection of a Western conception of *Gemeinschaft*.⁷

In terms of material foundations, as a direct offspring of his AGIL scheme, Parsons produced a conceptualisation that aimed at achieving a more subtle understanding of concrete social systems. If all of them could be compressed into that single mould, different types of systems would concentrate, functionally, on different requirements defined by the general scheme. This means, as for the **adaptation** function, that, although some social systems "function" having material productive activity as their chief concern, all of them are to a certain extent entangled in this dimension - for "...every social system has an economic aspect".⁸ Despite other interesting remarks, Parsons sustained a biased Cartesian contention which stated that social systems have

⁷R. Robertson, *Globalization. Social Theory and Global Culture*, London, Sage, 1992, p. 148.

⁸T. Parsons and N. Smelser, *Economy and Society*, p. 15. For reasons already stated, I disagree with the idea upheld in this very passage, when differentiating social systems in general from collectivities and inserting the economy in the first categorisation. In accordance with the main theses of this study an economy constitutes a collectivity, in spite of its typically low level of centring in the empirical realm. Herein I focus on the economy as an **analytical** element.

no contact with the "organic world", which falls upon the "behavioural organism".⁹

What Giddens has characterised, attempting to rework Marx's major insights, as the human "existential contradiction", has, however, direct implications for the theoretical definition of social systems. In Giddens's original formulation of that contradiction, it refers to humans' bodily constitution and the processes of interchange they unavoidably carry out with nature.¹⁰ As for social systems, this is what was above named **organic constitution**, a universal feature inherent to the concept of collective subjectivity. And it is on this irreducible basis, which is never thoroughly mastered by the humanisation of nature (including our inner and bodily one), that I want to place the "material" causality of social systems: this rescues the Aristotelian vision of "...life as a self-organizing, self-maintaining form, which can only operate in and therefore is inseparable from its material embodiment".¹¹ It is endowed with an efficacy that, notwithstanding its being mediated by social relations, has always an external character. Multicausality must be granted centre stage. Whether the social dynamic rests more upon the weight of this material dimension or upon the hermeneutic one is something that cannot be decided in principle, but only empirically.

⁹T. Parsons, *Societies*, pp. 8 and 15-6.

¹⁰A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 161.

¹¹C. Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 81. "Form" and material "content" are intertwined, since one does not precede the other.

Marx's analyses of the labour process were above (chap. 4.II) criticised for their underlying individualism; it is better to place stronger emphasis on the interactive moment of the human interchange with nature. This should underscore the fact that individuals relate to nature through the mediation of the interactive system in which they belong. This is so in the case of material production as well as in the situation wherein the material core of a social system is merely a component harnessed in the endeavour of achieving goals that pertain to another sphere. Marx was aware of the role of the products of work as means of consumption: dead labour should be set in movement by living labour in the process of production.¹² We can say that in social systems directly geared towards processes of material production, dead labour is consumed "productively", whereas in social systems that are geared towards other social spheres this consumption simply furnishes the bases whereupon the collectivity is constituted. The organic constitution of a social system is, therefore, necessarily part of **nature**, one which is, nevertheless, already transformed by erstwhile processes, and creates conditions that allow for the development of other interactions, in terms of multifarious and multidimensional collective practices. There remains, in any event, an unsurpassable natural element in all these social processes, as even an anti-essentialist thinker such as Foucault had to reckon, in relation to the biological

¹²K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, B. I, pp. 194-7.

bodily features that supply the basis whereupon power *dispositives* perform, turning the body "docile" or forming human social sexuality.¹³

II) THE SPACE-TIME DIMENSION OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

The space-time dimension must be added to our depiction of social systems as collective subjectivities. Traditionally, it has been taken for granted in sociological analyses, being more of a concern to philosophers and historians than to sociologists. Recently, this has been changing, but the social system perspective on this problem has not, however, been extensively nor successfully treated. A rejection of the Cartesian-Hobbesian view of social actor connects to a problematisation of the Newtonian-Kantian view of natural and social time and space in which individuals and collectivities are seen as moving through uniform time and undifferentiated space. Therefore, once collective subjectivities are introduced and placed at the core of the analysis, a new view of space and time becomes imperative.

Influenced by the definition of time and space by Newton as the coordinates wherein physical phenomena occur, Kant stated their existence as *a priori* elements of human faculties, which allow for synthetical knowledge: the structure of the human mind corresponds to that of nature, which was thereby understood as though internalised as an objective condition of knowledge. Parsons patently incorporated this point of view, giving short shrift

¹³M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, pp. 147ff; and *Histoire de la Sexualité*, v. 1, pp. 182ff.

to contemporary developments in the physical sciences. In the means-end analytic scheme of his theory of action, time had great importance as the coordinate wherein individuals carry their actions out. Space, conversely, was granted no role at the analytical level, although both were, of course, deemed relevant at the concrete level. If time clearly conformed to the Kantian view in the analytical dimension, together with space this obtained even more distinctly in the concrete level, since therein the focus was on the movement of beings within the Newtonian framework.¹⁴ Parsons stuck to these ideas in his subsequent work, introducing the "action-space" analytic dimension when he first formulated the AGIL scheme.¹⁵ Finally he arrived at the definition of time as a situational "parametric variable", wherein action takes place¹⁶; even though space was not brought up then, the formulation clearly rested upon the same initial foundations.

Giddens has tried a reassessment of the issue, whilst bearing in mind, at least in principle, some powerful influences - contemporary physics, Schutz's and Heidegger's phenomenologies, human geography and the Annales School's discussions of the *durée* of social life. As usual, he is very critical of functionalism, which is attacked for having mistakenly identified time and

¹⁴T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, pp. 45 and 762-3.

¹⁵T. Parsons and R. F. Bales, "The Dimensions of Action-Space", in *Working Papers in the Theory of Action*, pp. 71-88.

¹⁶T. Parsons, "An Approach to Psychological Theories in Terms of the Theory of Action", in Sigmund Koch, ed., *Psychology: a Study of a Science*, v. 3, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1959, p. 638.

change.¹⁷ Against Parsons' version of the "problem of order", he proposes a novel question: he asks how "form" comes about in social life, that is how social systems "bind" time and space, answering his query by pointing to the exercise of power.¹⁸ In a general statement on temporality, he enumerates three durations: Schutz's temporality of immediate experience, of daily life; Heidegger's temporality of the *Dasein*, the individual life-cycle; and Braudel's *longue durée* - "the long term sedimentation of social institutions".¹⁹ Drawing upon Hägerstrand's notion of individuals' "life-paths" and Goffman's "locales" - which are coupled with a peculiar reading of Heidegger - he offers still one more appraisal of the problem, according to which its solution must be discovered by "grasping the interpenetration of presence and absence, the movements of individuals through time-space seen as processes of 'presencing/absencing'".²⁰

It is undeniable that Giddens' proposes new openings for the theme. But not only contemporary physics and Braudel's *durées* do not receive adequate attention; his position is far too individualistic to come to grips with the broader space-time dimension of social systems. In what follows I shall concentrate on this axis.

¹⁷A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 198.

¹⁸Idem, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, pp. 30 and 84, and *The Constitution of Society*, pp. 35 and 258ff.

¹⁹Idem, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, pp. 19-20.

²⁰Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 37. See also his "Time and Social Organization", in *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*.

Norbert Elias advanced what may constitute a fresh start to our discussion when he wrote that the universe has added to the four dimensions of space and time a fifth one, "of consciousness, experience, or however one expresses it", with the appearance of human beings.²¹ Beyond the space-time dimension of nature we must, thus, consider, at a specific stage in biological evolution, a space-time social dimension, which possesses a conscious, phenomenological aspect. He suggested an interesting thesis on the "civilisational" outcome that the concept of time represents, not an *a priori*, contrary to what Descartes and Kant thought: it unifies a whole ensemble of processes and perceptions. Yet his position needs to be reformulated so as to lend a wider meaning to the fifth - social - dimension he identified. This is the space-time dimension of social systems and, whereas consciousness is an unavoidable trait of social relations, the awareness of that dimension individuals and collectivities manifest (as, in fact, of any other) is variable in its level and content. Social systems exist as physical space-time, in terms of the four dimensional coupling of these notions proposed by contemporary physics; but they are space-time in terms of their own constitution as **social** dimensions too.

Braudel's *durées* are particularly relevant to this discussion. He started by defining different "histories": the first, that of man with its environment, full of recurrences, almost without movement; the second, a slowly metred history, of "groups" and "groupings" - "social", he would say, if the term had not been, he argued, "deformed"; and a third one, traditional, which deals with

²¹N. Elias, *Time: an Essay*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell/ Cambridge, Three Cambridge Center, 1992 (1987), p. 81 (and also p. 35).

individuals, rich in passions and quick rhythms, an *histoire événementielle*.²² In subsequent publications he essayed to refine this ideas, giving them at times new twists. Without much specification he introduced the very slow time of "civilisations"²³, which was at last merged with the time of geography to produce the *longue durée*. To assign a theoretical place to this duration, the concept of "structure", imported from Lévi-Strauss's ethnology, was introduced. The two other temporalities remained as well, with the notion of conjuncture crafted to deal with the intermediate level.²⁴ It should be noted, though, that throughout these formulations every now and then he alluded to these *durées* as "rhythms" rather than things or types of history.

It is necessary to stress the heterogeneity of the categories he made use of. Why confine *événements* and the short duration to individuals? Notwithstanding his general anti-individualistic standpoint,²⁵ Braudel seems to have been definitely committed to an individualistic view of agency. On the contrary, we may say that organisations and social groups - i.e. collective subjectivities - are as important as individuals at the *événementiel* level. In a

²²Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Epoque de Philippe II*, v. I, Paris, Armand Colin, 1966 (1949), pp. 16-7.

²³Idem, "Positions de l'Histoire en 1950", in *Ecrits sur l'Histoire*, Paris, Flammarion, 1969, p. 24.

²⁴Idem, "Histoire et Science Sociales. La Longue Durée" (1958), in *Ecrits sur l'Histoire*, pp. 44-50. A steering force behind these shifts were the disputes within French academy. It is arguable whether the result of these disguised skirmishes was healthy to his formulations. See Jacques le Goff, "Le Changement dans la Continuité", and François Dosse, "Les Habits Neufs du Président Braudel", both in *Espace Temps*, n. 34-35, 1986 (respectively 20:22 and 83:93).

²⁵F. Braudel, "Positions de l'Histoire en 1950", pp. 21 and 35.

sense, the very idea of *événement* should be refashioned in order to allow for other occurrences that go beyond sheer individual action and causality. Moreover, why oppose conjuncture to *longue durée*, in other words, social groups to civilisations? They are both social systems, whereas geographical conditions should be kept analytically apart, conceived of as part of their organic constitution. Paul Ricoeur, in a recent book, has arrived at conclusions very similar in spirit to the ones I advance, when analysing this strand of French historiography. Departing from Aristotle's account of **narrative** procedures, he identifies the "*quasi*-characters" that historiography brings under the limelights in its narrative. Collectivities, organisations, nations, civilisations, engender the plot through which contemporary historians portray the unfolding of their subject matter.²⁶ We can profit from his discernment and assert that it is the whole space-time dimension of social systems that is depicted through that narration, although the first term of the pair comes out clearly, however partially, when structural analyses are undertaken.

It is true that individuals have a role to play in the space-time constitution of social systems. To do this, Hägelstrand's space-time paths followed by individuals in daily life, forming bundles that give rise to social life,²⁷ should be coupled with the notion of unintended consequences of action, recently discussed in relation to time by Patrik Baert - so as to incorporate and go

²⁶Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Recit*, t. I, Paris, Seuil, 1985, pp. 255 and 270ff.

²⁷See Torsten Hägerstrand, "The Domain of Human Geography", in Richard J. Chorley, ed., *Directions in Geography*, London, Methuen & Co., 1973; and "Space, Time and Human Condition", in A. Karlquist *et al.*, eds., *Dynamic Allocation of Urban Space*, Wermeads, Saxon House/ Lexington, Lexington Books, 1975.

further than Elias' formulation of the fifth dimension as necessarily conscious.²⁸ Carrying out their activities, individuals contribute - intendedly or unintendedly, knowledgeably or not - to the space-time constitution of social systems. In any case, Braudel's utilisation of Lévi-Strauss's concept of structure should be revised, since he embraced, however in a transformed manner, the ontological character that lies at the core of the latter's idea. Rather than a structure, the *longue durée*, like the others, refers to the **rhythms of unfolding, reproduction and change**, of social systems. Structures in Braudel's case point in fact to "structurings" (and "destructurings") that lead to the patterning of social systems, the constituting processes of which we shall once more dwell upon below. Although his durations do not furnish precise concepts - and it should be said that not all social systems, some of fairly brief existence, attain the long duration - they bring into the open the problem and hint at possible solutions.²⁹

This constitutes the time aspect of the space-time dimension of social systems. As for the space aspect, Giddens' contribution, above mentioned, may be assumed to be correct, providing we add some elements to his formulation. He understands that power is the main element in the bringing together of otherwise scattered elements of social systems. Alongside Mann's differentiation between "intensive" and "extensive" power, this conception is of fundamental importance to thinking about the establishment of what have

²⁸P. Baert, *Time, Self, and Social Being*, pp. 104-66.

²⁹This is the case also with the discussion proposed by G. Gurvitch, *The Spectrum of Social Time*, Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1964, pp. 29ff.

been called "boundaries" and the higher or lower internal density of social systems.³⁰ But other elements must be taken into account: dispositions, interests, "value commitments" and the like (which will be discussed shortly) are important elements in this process and an assessment of a social system's spacial **configuration** is incomplete if it does not pay attention to them. Therefore, their limits may be more or less clearly defined (in terms of "roles", membership, closeness or openness to "interchange" with other systems); and they are internally condensed to varying degrees.

We can now propose a definition of the space-time dimension of social systems, the two aspects of which have been, for exposition's sake, analytically treated in separation. Space-time is the dimension of social systems that accounts for their rhythms of unfolding, reproduction and interaction as more or less demarcated and compact entities. In addition, they evolve within encompassing social systems, which contribute to their space-time constitution, whilst they exert, in turn, an influence on the same dimension of these broader systems. Even if only partially intertwined with each other, or when they simply share the same interactive setting, social systems yield a reciprocal influence on their respective space-time constitution.

Such a notion of configuration offers, moreover, an alternative to the notion of boundaries which - from Parsons' use of biological and general systems theory on - has become so prominent in sociology, even in Habermas'

³⁰M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, v. I, p. 7.

work.³¹ That formulation implies a rigidity, definition and clear-cut delimitation which is often inimical to the reality of those social interactive bundles. Not only do they intertwine, share blurred "frontiers" (as, for instance, most states before the modern era did) and have an identity which does not sharply separate them out from other systems, which, from another angle, Parsons' "onion-like" scheme does suggest -at best the attribution of sharply demarcated boundaries is a formulation of the analyst, similar and perhaps linked to the concept of model or structure formerly debated, although some collectivities, such as nation-states originally (though no longer) near this distinct insularity.

This portrait of different social systems, in varied and uneven relations, with diverse rhythms and configurations, is directly related to the conception of social systems developed in this study, based, as it is, on social relations and the establishment of properties that cannot be reduced to the elementary elements that constitute these systems. This is one of the primary reasons for the refusal of a Newtonian-Hobbesian view of social life (expounded in chap. 1.III) - and why an alternative to it was pursued. The traditional conception of time and space forwarded by Newton and Kant does not suffice any longer either. Consequently, inspiration was looked for in contemporary notions of physics, with Minkowski's four dimensional space-time held loosely as an alternative view of the problem, although it is not, of course, mandatory.

³¹T. Parsons, *The Social System*, pp. 36, 482-3 and 542-3; "On Building Social Systems Theory", in *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*, pp. 27-8 and 48-9; and "An Outline of the Social System", in T. Parsons *et al.*, *Theories of Society*, pp.34-5 and 38ff. For Habermas, see chap. 3.II.

In any case, the conceptualisation above proposed is very much in agreement with the conviction that animates contemporary cosmology. In Michael Shallins' words:

Our cosmology, therefore, is an abstract and mathematical one.

We no longer envisage the universe in terms of absolute space, a vast three dimensional matrix in which things happen at specific moments according to some absolute and universal clock, but as one in which time is relative, passes by at variable rates for different observers and yet, seemingly, can be thought of as ticking by uniformly for the universe as a whole.³²

Added to this, it should be stressed that the "fifth", social dimension of space-time must not be oblivious to the impact of collective subjectivities: they are essential factors, not only via their internal unfolding and reproduction, but via interaction too, to the establishment of both the local and the global time that ticks nowadays for the human species as a whole as well as in terms of the rhythms which, for the simple fact that they have themselves an organic basis, social systems contradictorily share with nature.³³ This is an element which they can by no means evade. In fact, the Second Law of Thermodynamics probably underpins, in social systems as well as in nature,

³²Michael Shallins, "Time and Cosmology", in Raymond Flood and Michael Lockwood, eds., *The Nature of Time*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 66.

³³See Barbara Adam, *Time and Social Theory*, Cambridge, Polity, 1990.

the irreversibility of time, the pointing of its "arrow" in the direction of the future.

III) DISPOSITIONS, INTERESTS AND THE STRUCTURING OF COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITIES

The notion of "structuring" processes of social systems (discussed in chap. 6.III) - and more directly related to face-to-face interactions - can be now referred to collective subjectivities, bearing in mind also the theme of multicausality. We will be able thereby to contemplate the processes of constitution of large-scale social systems.

Reshaping Marx's understanding of the relations between the classes by means of the concept of **hegemony**, Gramsci attempted to shed light on how coercion and consensus contribute concurrently to the reproduction and possible change of society. He was keen on grasping and stressing the means and forms whereby some rule, legitimately within certain limits, whilst others are oppressed, without, however, usually sliding into passive subordination.³⁴ Parsons' notion of power as a medium wherewith commitments are enacted within social systems shares similar insights with Gramsci - notwithstanding his avoidance of issues linked to domination and class struggle plus, once again, an excessive stress on integration, via moral commitments. Consisting of a "media of interchange", power would insure the performance of the units

³⁴This is present throughout his writings, but see especially A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carceri*, v. 2, pp. 1222 and 1245-50 (texts from 1932/5), and v. 3, p. 2010 (text from 1934/5).

of a system in terms of collective goals. The explicit or implicit threat of force would back up this capacity of enacting commitments and mobilising the collectivity internally.³⁵ Parsons' idea supposes and demands, instead of being excluded by, a more traditional notion of power, which harks back to the realism of Hobbes and Weber. This notion is contemporarily sustained by Giddens, according to whom power is the capacity to make one's will prevail despite or against the will or resistance of another, within relations based on divergent interests and unequal resources.³⁶

In the middle period of Parsons' development Lockwood pointed to the underestimation of the material dimension of social action in those functionalist theories. By this he meant **interests**, which could not be reduced to the normative dimension, either conceptually or in reality, since the **conflictual** nature of society originates from them.³⁷ By the time Parsons had become an institutional monument in the American university, a renewed wave of utilitarianism was to gather momentum, with particular awareness of the theme characterised as "collective action".

Mancur Olson brought out the unlikely unification of large groups, should they organise a collective action oriented towards the realisation of the interests of the individuals that comprise them, whereas as for small groups the

³⁵T. Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power" (1963) and "Some Reflections on the Place of Force in Social Process" (1964), in *Sociological Theory and Modern Society*.

³⁶A. Giddens, "The Concept of Power in the Writings of Talcott Parsons", in *Studies in Social and Political Theory*, p. 347.

³⁷D. Lockwood, "Some Remarks on 'The Social System'", *The British Journal of Sociology*, v. 7, 1956 (134:146).

situation would be rather distinct. The inevitable dispersion of the large group, and the irrelevance of individual actions taken outside its organisation, would make collective action impossible, unless there were other "positive inducements" or plain coercion to join in, or else if it beget "by products", which constitute "selective incentives". Another difficulty would be yielded by what has been called "free rider" benefits, i.e. those that accrue to an individual without any cost, irrespective of whether s/he participates or not in the inclusive group's collective action. Individuals, because of their interests, would, therefore, not come together in a joint movement. However, in small groups, notwithstanding distortions on the allotment of the burden of effort amongst actors, the scale of the relationship would entail a collective action oriented to the fulfilment of their interests.³⁸ Przeworski, partially influenced by this utilitarianism and to counter a culturalistic understanding of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, highlighted the interests which, in the working class, lead to the reproduction of capitalism in the face of a lack of alternatives and problems that are entailed by the transition to socialism.³⁹

I think that it is, nevertheless, necessary to proceed carefully with regard to the themes thrown up above. The connection between values, norms and

³⁸Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971 (1965), pp. 1-3, 33-4, 46 and 65. It would be fair enough to recognise that Marx had himself realised the relevance of the problems these writers raise when he discussed the difficult process of class constitution, in terms of the options open to individuals in relation to the definition of their interests and possible courses of action to fulfil them, as well as to the organisations which originate to meet their necessities. See chap. 4.II.

³⁹A. Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, chap. IV.

interests has been mostly a difficult one to grasp and the meaning of the meaning of interest has consisted in an almost mute question, *pace* its widespread use in the social sciences. Interest is a notion that assumed distinctiveness and prominence only with the emergence of capitalism. Ever since the utilitarians defined it as something associated with the pleasure of egoistic individuals and took their material - pecuniary - expression as the one they could more easily identify and measure⁴⁰, interests became a centre piece of ideologies and of social analyses, without further clarification. Marxists, but also authors who belong to other schools, often depict a distinction between collectively defined objective and subjective interests⁴¹ (which receive, however, no actual clarification); Weber stressed individual "material" and "ideal" interests as opposed to "values"⁴²; and Parsons, interestingly enough, rephrased that notion with recourse to Freudian insights, fusing organic drives and cultural conditionings, which work in terms of optimisation (see chap. 5.II). In contrast, contemporary utilitarian writers fall back upon the sheer pecuniary and measurable interests Bentham conceptualised and bequeathed to posterity. At best, they adopt a position analogous to Weber's. Of course, the

⁴⁰See Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977; and Elis Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism*, London, Faber & Faber, 1934.

⁴¹See J. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*, pp. 511-3 and 941-6.

⁴²M. Weber, "The Social Psychology of World Religions" (1919) in *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology* (ed. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills), London, Routledge, 1991, p. 280.

cultural foundations of the capitalist civilisation⁴³ make rather plausible an interpretation of humans as self-interested, maximising individuals, which, moreover, to a large extent becomes true in social systems organised according to those patterns and as a consequence of the absorption of these ideas in society at large.

Whether there is an underlying maximising or optimising drive in humans, especially in material terms, beyond the level of basic organic subsistence, is something the truthfulness of which cannot be decided herein - and its arguable whether it could be at all, beyond the inductive knowledge we can gain from the study of human history and evolution. Nor is it necessary for this investigation. What is needed is the definition of a number of concepts so as to assess and explicate the behaviour of individuals in connection to the formation of collective subjectivities. I want to propose a threefold analytical conceptualisation: **interests**, **dispositions** and **interactive inclinations** comprise the set that will answer to that demand.

Interests will be conceived of as **objectives** which individuals and collective subjectivities set to themselves. With this definition, I am following Hindess, who, moreover, correctly asserts that interests are not given: on the contrary, it is in the interactive processes in which individuals and collectivities are enmeshed that their interests take shape - they are not given *a priori*.⁴⁴

⁴³See, for a discussion of these cultural elements, Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*, Chicago/ London, The Chicago University Press, 1976.

⁴⁴B. Hindess, *Political Choice & Social Structure*, pp. 36ff and 66ff. For a discussion that associates interests, interaction and social movements, see C. Tilly, "Models and Realities of Popular Collective Action", *Social Research*, v. 52, 1985 (717:747).

Interests refer to **social** and **non-social** objects. Bourdieu's concept of **habitus**, whereby individuals' **dispositions** are brought to bear on a spontaneously coordinated collective behaviour (see chap. 1.IV), furnishes some further help. Dispositions are inclinations to act, i.e. motivations, which do not need to imply - although they may - normative anchors, contrary to what Parsons thought, insofar as routine may utterly or partially underpin human behaviour. These individual dispositions must be regarded, however, in their collective dimension, as **properties** of social systems, whether classes, groups or organisations. This train of reasoning by no means leads towards an idea of collective motivations thought out after individual psychological mechanisms, since **social relations** provide the means whereby those collective dispositions come about; besides, it makes no sense to speak about "gratification" in terms of collectivities, unless we refer to individuals. At most, individuals psychologically gratified can reinforce the solidarity of the collectivity, to the extent that this satisfaction relates to the goals and the functioning of the social system. Dispositions of individuals and collectivities are, on the other hand, both generated in the course of **interactive** processes. Dispositions underpin interests which, in turn, contribute to the moulding of dispositions. Similarly to interests, dispositions address social and non-social objects. The reference for both may be the format and direction of those processes as such, producing what I want to call the **interactive inclinations** of social systems. Interactive processes are conditional to the attainment of collective goals, which may consist of the unfolding and outcome of the interaction as such, *per se* or with regard to other goals. Normativity, material interests, fear, etc., are varied

elements that constitute the **habitus** of collectivities and decisively contribute to the generation of their interests.

The more centred and compactly organised a social system happens to be the more directed and concentrated the final result of its intentional impact. Homogeneous groups in terms of individual motivations may, conversely, end up with a more loose and dispersive collective disposition, inasmuch as their level of centring and density is low. Take, for instance, a factory: traversed by conflicts of interest and heterogeneous collective dispositions - e.g. blue and white collar workers, managers and owners - it often works with great efficiency. The functionalist idea of **role-differentiation** tried in part to account for this.⁴⁵ On the other hand, a football team may become very weak in the face of an adversary, just because it has lost the favour of the supporters, or because the coach has no longer the respect of the players, or still because internal strife is writ large; the common desire to win may be marred by the sheer lack of greater concatenation and mutual allegiance, which entails an irresolute collective inclination in relation to the adversary.

Individuals or groups may, therefore, follow their dispositions and thereby facilitate a well-centred subjectivity, with distinctive identity, decision-making centres, clear membership definition, strong intentionality. But something very different may come about. The first possibility is that they do not pull together, bringing the level of centring to something close to nought. The second possibility is that they in fact organise, but that this does not require a high

⁴⁵See T. Parsons, *The Social System*, p. 114.

level of centring. The concrete corollary hinges, of course, on the concrete social system.

All things considered, the idea that interests must be always explicit and distinctive, as sustained by Hindess,⁴⁶ cannot be accepted. It is excessively dependent upon his centred notion of actor. Even Parsons, with the substitution of "units of action" for "unit acts" - since action, even in individual terms, does not always imply distinctive ends - went further in this respect (see chap. 5.II). To be sure, it is not that there are interests, which would stem from their structural position, that individual actors and collectivities are prevented from identifying - although it must be said that social stratification and hierarchy do permit that certain collectivities avoid the discussion of issues, prevent people from proposing ends and finding out means, as well as give them greater capacity of influence over the constitution of other collectivities, their interests included. As for the constitution of collective subjectivities, it is capital to stress that interests may be more distinctive and homogeneous or more fuzzy and heterogeneous, depending on, in some part, the level of (de)centring of the collectivity.

The notion of habitus, comprising dispositions, must be seen as an aspect of collective life-worlds. In this regard, it must be also appraised in specific cases bearing in mind the syllogism of the general, the particular and the singular. How much individuals and internal (or perpendicular) groups share a habitus is a question that must be decided with reference to each concrete case. Generally, however, we may say that it has a decisive impact upon the

⁴⁶B. Hindess, *Political Choice & Social Structure*, pp. 73-7.

level of centring of a collective subjectivity, drawing closer or distancing the units of which the system is composed. The extent to which interests are, or are seen as if they were, complementary is also variable. Coercion, of course, plays an eminent role, since, being often a key component of the constitution of social systems, it greatly affects their level of centring; the concrete distribution of resources between individuals and groups is partially responsible for the concrete weight coercion, openly or latently, may assume in an interactional setting. **Constraint, compromises and consensual regulations**, based on general or sectional "interests" and dispositions, are forms of the structuring of social relations that come about in accordance with collectivities' interactive inclinations.⁴⁷ These are the processes that govern the (re)production of **institutions** - "the most deeply-layered practices constitutive of social systems", in terms of recursive organisation of practices and space-time breadth, that is their presence across a range of interactions.⁴⁸

IV)STRATIFICATION AND RESOURCES

We should certainly consider the possibility of social structurings that would erase or at least reduce inequalities in social life with regard to certain central institutional spheres; social life as we have known it, however, has been rife with disparities of power, resources and prestige. To tackle social stratification and hierarchies, it is important to take into account that

⁴⁷J. Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus*, pp. 153-6.

⁴⁸See A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 65.

individuals and groups are defined not only for what they are, but for what they are **reputed to be** too. Their "perceived being" (*etre perçu*) is, as Bourdieu tells us, as important as what they actually are. If their symbolic dimension is dependent upon those more straightforward features, it cannot be reduced to them.⁴⁹ As we have seen, Marx's syllogism implies a hierarchised way of structuring social relations. Resources are crucial to this, both in their organic and hermeneutic dimensions, as well as in terms of social relations by means of which collectivities can mobilise resources in order to (re)produce their dominant position or challenge the powerful.

Parsons in fact evoked such distinctions regarding resources with respect to an analytical approach to stratification. He advanced a twofold conceptualisation, which classifies the units of a system in terms of their "ranking" according to the "standards of the common value system", but also appraises them in terms of their actual "power", their capacity to attain their goals. Whereas evaluation rests upon their perceived "properties" (qualities, performances and possessions), in **comparison** with other units, real power should be measured against their actual possessions and the degree of indulgence with which their deviances from established norms are met.⁵⁰ To draw these observations closer to the concept of collective subjectivity, certain issues must be clarified and some ideas recast.

⁴⁹P. Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, p. 233. See, for further discussion of hierarchies in the sociological literature, N. Mouzelis, *Back to Sociological Theory*, chap. 7.

⁵⁰T. Parsons, "A Revised Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification", in *Essays in Sociological Theory*, pp. 388-92. This ideas received shape before his reformulation of the concept of power.

First I want to introduce a distinction between the organic constitution of a social system and the **resources** that it can bring into play when facing other units in a given social arena or field. In concrete terms, the distinction is blurred, consisting, however, in a necessary one on the analytical plane. Parsons concept of "possessions" will be analytically split in two: they are part of a social system, as a property, an intrinsic attribute; or they are elements which, lying outside the system, are of feasible manipulation. Properties are reproduced and thus endorsed in terms of structurings which, in terms of broad social relations, take on an **institutional** form. Conversely, resources may be either institutionalised or possess a more contingent character. Thereby we can distinguish between internal and external **mobilisation**. The first has received attention from writers such as Etzioni, who is basically concerned with how collectivities are able to achieve higher level of centring and, thereby, of "activity", marshalling assets which belong to their "sub-units".⁵¹ I want to emphasise precisely the other aspect of "mobilisation".

This is how the bourgeoisie, i.e. "capital", is the sum of its material possessions, guaranteed by economic, political and cultural institutions, but is able - and needs - to swallow the working classes, transforming them into part of its own reproduction in the production process. Cognitive capacities fall under the same rubric and analytical divisions: industrial espionage furnishes information on ways of doing things; once stolen from a company, they become part of the constitution of the other which managed to get hold of

⁵¹ Amitai Etzioni, *The Active Society*, New York, Free Press, 1968, pp. 387ff.

them, whereas before that they were solely a potential external resource. Caught up in the process of the globalization of the planet in a situation of practical inferiority, "archaic" communities have reversed, to an extent, the asymmetry of the relationship they formerly developed with anthropologists. They are no longer solely their object of study. More prudent in the way they deal with social scientists, those communities have also been using them to further their causes and, moreover, have drawn upon the knowledge produced by that discipline so as to understand themselves. Anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss feel depressed by that, scared perhaps that these communities might in fact decide to study something such as the "Lévi-Strauss tribe".⁵² They place that scientific instrument, however, alongside their own traditions, without moreover embracing the world-view associated with Western science, which is treated basically as a resource.

Network analysis has been very much attentive to this sort of issue. According to the theorem of someone working within this trend, "the success of instrumental action is associated positively with the social resources provided by the contact".⁵³ This contribution stresses the fact that the position of the "actor" in the upper layers of the social hierarchy facilitates in principle access to resources outside. Tilly underlines, to some extent, this point too,

⁵²For Lévi-Strauss's opinion, see his interview to Fábio Altman, "Um Sábio na Tribo do Passado", *Revista Veja*, n. 1292 16/06/1993 (48:50). For a more general discussion, see George E. Marcus and Michael M. I. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 37-8 and 44.

⁵³N. Lin, "Social Resources and Instrumental Action", in P. V. Marsden and N. Lin, eds., *Social Structure and Network Analysis*, p. 133.

drawing in addition our attention to the question highlighted above in connection with Parsons's argument: he observes that a "mobilization" group riveting on the "building of an arsenal" will be more likely to "get away" with running "afoul of the law" the more powerful it is.⁵⁴ He is, actually, the original source of inspiration for social movements resource analysis, which has emphasised - often in regard to the media - how those collectivities can and do reach out to elements they do not in principle control in order to advance their causes.⁵⁵ The relation between resources and hierarchy is, nonetheless, more complex, as shall be seen below.

As for the hermeneutic dimension, i.e. as for how collectivities are perceived by others in ranking terms, we can say that it influences the position of units in the system in two dimensions. On the one hand, this position may be conferred to them because they are perceived as occupying it for intrinsic reasons, although of course the latter are socially delineated. This is the obvious case for qualities such as beauty or performances like obtaining a Ph D degree (which then becomes a quality of their possessors). On the other hand, the hermeneutic dimension is defined in accordance with the legitimation for the differentiated ranking, symbolic and real, of diverse units in the hierarchical system. The lack of fit which Parsons noted is often, however, much larger than he assumed it to be, insofar as his solution to the problem of order clung to normative controls, with less than adequate attention given to

⁵⁴C. Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, p.57.

⁵⁵See Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy, eds., *The Dynamics of Social Movements*, Cambridge (MA), Winthrop, 1979.

the role coercion plays in unequal social structurings. Besides, in accordance with previous similar statements (see chap. 6.III and above), I want to draw the distinction between the hermeneutic dimension in terms of the constitution of a collectivity and the possibility of norms and evaluations persisting as external to it - sometimes as a constraint, to be sure, but often as a resource as well. This means, of course, that authority, irrespective of the high level of its legitimacy, is never total, unless a real consensus, as devised by Habermas, underlies the establishment of the social hierarchy - and even in this case one might wonder about the role envy and other human feelings might play. Provision made for that possibility, legitimate authority is usually coupled with domination, which stands on its own sometimes, with no legitimation processes to secure it.

The possibility that images and norms are treated in instrumental terms must be reckoned with. Collectivities may maintain a very much pragmatic attitude towards the "legitimate order" in which they are subordinate - this would be the case of the working classes in the West today, as mentioned above - or may deal with it, whatever their position in the hierarchy, as something not really to be respected, but only used, deceptively if necessary, to guarantee the prevalence of their goals. Thereby these hermeneutic features should be seen, analytically, as either properties of a collectivity or as resources that lie outside it. The corruption so often associated with governmental groups all over the world, even when they rise to power calling for morality in public life, is an extremely obvious and conspicuous example of sheer instrumental collective attitude towards "rules". Weber has, with

regard to Protestantism, drawn attention to this instrumental use of world-views:

As is well known, not a few (one may say the majority of the older generation) of American 'promoters', 'captains of industry', of the multi-millionaires and trust magnates belonged formally to sects, especially to the Baptists. However, in the nature of the case, these persons were often affiliated for merely conventional reasons...their religiosity was, of course, often of a more than dubious character.⁵⁶

Therewith they achieved social legitimation and business contacts; other groups, more deeply connected to these life styles were, according to him, responsible for the changes in patterns of orientation that led up to the modern world's distinctive outlook.

We should, in any case, be aware of what Giddens has called the "dialectics of control". In fact, he proposes this concept with reference to individual actors, who, under domination, always find ways to influence their situation, to an at least minimal degree.⁵⁷ I want to transpose this idea to the level of interaction between collective subjectivities. No situation brought about by the interaction of two or more collectivities would, thus, be entirely

⁵⁶M. Weber, "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1906), in *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, p. 308.

⁵⁷A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 145ff.

defined by the dominant pole in the relation. Regardless of how restricted the capacity a collective subjectivity has to, more or less consciously, or intentionally, make its imprint on the outcome of the interaction in which it takes part, it is always an active element. It is true, on the other hand, that the degree to which it has its room to manoeuvre varies. This variation ranges from almost complete incapacity, constitutionally or situationally given, in the case of a subordinate system, to an almost balanced situation, or even overwhelming command, if it is the dominant pole in a given interaction. Any social system, in whatever situation, has a minimal strength to define the core values and orientations of broader social system, as well as the institutional and material elements which give shape to the situations that result from its interactive processes - and, of course, itself as a collectivity. Habermas' rejection of the old Frankfurt School pessimistic account of contemporary Western societies and Foucault's detection of countervailing powers in the face of a dominant *dispositif*⁵⁸ should be both referred to this pervasive "dialectics of control". Again in these reflections we can discern the role played by irreducible particularities, which resist the assimilation of more powerful systems.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasise that the very position a ruling collectivity occupies in the social hierarchy may prevent it from making use of resources that are available to other groups, such as ideologies, cultural patterns and practices, and so forth. When young Brazilian black people started

⁵⁸See, for Habermas, chap. 3.I and III; plus, M. Foucault, "Two Lectures" (1976), in *Power and Knowledge* (ed. by Colin Gordon), Brighton, Harvester, 1980, p. 83.

making use of James Brown's and other North-American soul music some decades ago, it was clear that, whereas the white Brazilian population could borrow from European and North-American white culture, it would be harder for them to do the same with black cultural expressions. Their identity as a relatively distinct, though subordinate group, was thereby in part secured, although no articulate project had been devised in that direction. At least to a considerable extent, this was a totally unintended outcome of choices and inclinations of young black people who shared similar life-histories and happened to enjoy that sort of music.⁵⁹

⁵⁹See Renato Ortiz, *Cultura Brasileira e Identidade Nacional*, São Paulo, Brasiliense, 1985, p. 8. For the production and consumption of music as a process that involves collective subjectivities (although the author has in mind in fact the outcome of the process in its totality), see H. Becker, "Art as Collective Action", *American Sociological Review*, v. 39, 1974 (767:776).

CONCLUSION

I) COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY: A TYPOLOGY

Endeavouring to form a classification of social systems, a number of typologies have been proposed in sociology. In the course of our discussion we met, and I often criticised, other attempts at differentiating types of social system. Especially significant for our discussion is the distinction some authors have drawn between groups and "quasi-groups". Whereas the former would imply definite relations between individuals, each of them being conscious of the group and its symbols, with the collectivity possessing basic organisation and structure as well as a psychological foothold in the mind of its members, the latter would lack these characteristics. Social classes, age, status and sex groups would belong in this second type.¹

Gurvitch attempted to further develop a taxonomy related to the subject of this study. Discussing the several relations of *we's* with *alter-egos*, he identifies four types of social collectivities: micro collectivities, which would be very flexible; groups, more structured and more strongly held together by *centripetal* forces; social classes, partial multi-functional macrocosms of groupings that oppose other classes; and global societies, "macrocosms of macrocosms". Particularly relevant to our discussion is his conceptualisation of two types of "sociability": the first would be "passive", founded on affective ties, but not on goals; the second, "active", would, on the contrary, be based upon the accomplishment of "*oeuvres*". Groups would always be of the second

¹The distinction between groups and quasi-groups is pivotal to the discussion in R. Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959, pp. 173-89.

sort - denoting a "unity of attitudes, of oeuvres and of conducts", not all of them however consisting of organisations; the "mass", communities and pure forms of communion would be characteristic of the first one. Moreover, social classes, societies and even larger groups, even when they are passive, would count on active groups, which guarantee their existence, although they sometimes provoke internal turmoil or stalemates.² Gurvitch's ideas are, to an extent, in agreement with the theses on collective subjectivity herein developed, especially when he suggested something similar to a view of social systems as intertwined and mutually conditioning each other.

But his separation of groups from other types of collectives is not dissimilar to the aforementioned one between groups and quasi-groups. And both need to be handled carefully, since, even though the fluidity of this kind of differentiation is often acknowledged in regard to concrete social systems, it still owes its *raison-d'être* to that traditional opposition between conditioning and active causality. Instead of accepting this split, therefore, I shall propose a typology grounded on a continuum of levels of centring and intentionality. The level of centring should be, in fact, regarded as the primary one, whereas the level of intentionality of the movement of a collectivity is directly related to the extent to which the social system is centred. As we will see in the next section, this level of centring, if high, is not capable, *per se*, of assuring great impact of the collectivity upon its interactive setting. It should be added to this that the levels of centring and intentionality of collectivities vary according to

²G. Gurvitch, "Probleme de Sociologie Generale", in G. Gurvitch, ed., *Traité de Sociologie*, t. I, pp. 172ff.

internal and external circumstances, within the limits of the specific features of different types of social system.

Typologies are, to a certain degree, inescapably arbitrary, always provisional and only useful tools when we undertake to approach reality, building a worthwhile bridge between general theoretical constructions and more empirically oriented concepts. The typology presented herein does not pretend to evade these characteristics. Let us examine it:

1)The first type to be considered is what I want to call **network**. It may be more or less diffuse or more or less structured, but its level of centring is usually low. Its members, individuals and collectivities, come together without the intention and organisation to effect a direct and focused impact upon reality. Broad friendship webs and broad intellectual circles, consumers of certain products, extensive families in societies wherein nuclear families are the basic unit of kinship and so forth, are some of the instances we can encompass under the classification of network. A very significant example of this type is the economy as a social system (not, I repeat, the economy as the mediation of society and nature in analytical terms) - especially when organised as an ideal competitive market. This is not true in societies in which it is firmly entangled with other systems, whether of kinship or politics. In social formations wherein it has achieved a considerable amount of autonomisation from other spheres, it must be regarded as a network, which possesses a low level of centring and intentionality.

2)Classes, genders, races, and ethnic formations constitute another important type. I shall call them **categories**. Their level of centring and intentionality is already higher than that of networks. They may, though they may not, develop common identities, become organised, and exert a rather intentional action in social life. In any event, it is unlikely that these collectivities can surmount their internal heterogeneous features and fractures, for - criss-crossed themselves by the whole range of social phenomena - **centrifugal** forces are almost necessarily at work within them, except in specific conjunctures, during which the sort of identity upon which they are built becomes endowed with a powerful force.

3)**Groups** consist our third type of social system. Their level of centring is potentially very high, for their identity is virtually already given and it is possible for them to become organised and effective without much effort. Peer groups, close friendships, community neighbourhoods and, at the extreme potential level, the family - in accordance with the dominant kind of kinship structure of society, whether extended or nuclear - provide some of the main examples of this category.

4)**Encounters**, haphazard or not, may achieve high level of centring. For example, coming to constitute quickly formed and dissolved mobs, as it has been of the tradition of the English popular classes. A myriad of other circumstantial groups are formed and dissolved in daily life, with a low or high level of centring.

5)**Social movements** are a peculiar category, almost a network, but usually possess more awareness, that is self-identity, and capacity of joint mobilisation.

They stand out because of their historical relevance too. They tend to be relatively loosely organised, notwithstanding the existence at times within them of tighter groupings - of intellectuals, for example - or organisations - such as political parties, associations, newspapers or unions - which promote higher level of centring, or strive to do so, often unintentionally achieving the opposite, though.

6) **Organisations** are the sort of social system capable of attaining the highest level of centring and intentionality, despite the fact that this is not given either. Formal organisations have received pride of place for a number of years, as we have seen, as the paradigm of the collective actor in much of sociological theory. Superseded by the broader notion of collective subjectivity, they are by no means the cornerstone for theory building in this study. They retain, however, an important position, not only because of their growing prominence in contemporary society, but also for their extremely high potential level of demarcation, centring and intentionality. Political parties, business corporations, the state and its diverse bureaucratic branches, the army, etc., have all been interpreted as formal organisations. Speaking of organisations in a more general way, I want to make clear that other collectivities, such as football teams or criminal gangs, may be considered under this typological heading. Churches and sects usually consist in organisations as well.

7) **Societies** are a peculiar case of social system. Not because they would be self-subsistent, as envisaged by Parsons, a hypothesis progressively less tenable today. Nor do they necessarily coincide with nation-states: cities, civilisations and world-systems should also be understood under this classification. They

are **total social systems**, encompassing diverse networks, social groups and categories, criss-crossed by conflicts and contradictions. Although their effectiveness hinges on processes of cohesion and intentional impact that are not automatically and directly to be identified with them, their identity and thereby potential relative level of centring are thus quite frequently extremely high, depending on an array of other circumstances, for example state legitimacy, urban pride, the outbreak of war, etc.

I have refused for excessively closely associated with traditional notions Gurvitch's sharp distinction between active and passive collectivities. Nonetheless, the idea, as suggested in his work, that some collectivities largely depend on other collectivities to become centred or heighten this level and that of intentionality is rather interesting. Utilitarian thinkers concerned with "collective action" and the emergence of organisations from interest groups have lent outstanding importance to this issue. Olson is greatly concerned with this question, directly identifying group size with the degree of possibility of joint action. For him, as we have seen (in chap. 8.III), large groups tend not to organise, since they have no incentives to come together, according to a strict utilitarian logic, and therefore enjoy a very low capacity of impact upon social processes. Small groups would not incur these difficulties. What is at the core of his argument, however, is the capacity a certain group has to attain intentional action, which, in turn, depends on its possible level of centring. Placing his stress on size, he does not perceive this issue. Russell Hardin recently added his thoughts on this utilitarian reasoning, showing that, provided

some individuals profit enough from supplying the goods themselves, they will do so, regardless of whether they have to support the burden of the task alone or not.³

It is necessary to take this discussion further, even though the idea I want to introduce is not at total variance with the points raised by those writers. In dealing with interest groups, their ideas touch upon important issues. The real factors for discussion should nonetheless be the level of centring and intentionality a group can achieve - underpinned either by collective dispositions (utilitarian motivations, normative impulses, etc.) or coercion. Size is not a key variable *per se*, although it may imply that other subgroups need to emerge from larger ones so as to confer a collectivity with higher levels of centring and intentionality and then greater immediate impact.

II) A CONTROLLING FRAME OF REFERENCE

The dimensions we have been focusing on can all be grasped by means of the concept of structure I considered in previous chapters. Thus, we can render the organic constitution of social systems, their perspectives, their space-time configuration, their power relations, their dispositions and interests, their interactive inclinations, in terms of models or structures. The same is true as for their levels of centring and intentionality. To what degree do these elements influence the capacity of impact social systems exert in social life -

³Russell Hardin, *Collective Action*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, pp. 41ff.

that is how much do they contribute to what will be called hereafter their **potency**?⁴ We will go over and detail the content of the elements listed above so as to meet this question.

Possibly implying identity, existence and strength of decision-making centres, demarcation and internal compactness - though not all of them necessarily together - the level of centring directly determines what was named level of intentionality - the clear-cut and focused joint movement of a collectivity. As for their perspectives, we may say that they indirectly influence what I have called their interactive inclinations, by means of which I mean the direction towards which a collective subjectivity, in a more or less intentional form, interacts with other social systems. The form and content of their perspectives increase or decrease their impact upon their interactive settings. The mediation between these perspectives and inclinations is carried out by the collectivity's dispositions. On the other hand, the organic constitution of a social system is significant in social processes, as a function of its internal material capacities, again taken or utilised in a more or less intentional manner.

The problem is that if we refer to collectivities as the units that exercise **might** - i.e. the extent to which they are able to make use of resources that lie outside themselves - the level of centring of these social systems must be

⁴Parsons defined the term in relation to a unit's "...relative capacity to influence the outcome of a process", as compared to other units in an interactive system. He related it directly to the **stratification** of the system, which is too simple. We need to take into account, together with the hierarchy of such inclusive settings, other elements, as seen above. For his point of view, consult T. Parsons, "An Approach to Psychological Theory in Terms of the Theory of Action", in S. Koch, ed., *Psychology: a Study of a Science*, v. 3, p. 638.

examined beforehand: as much as any other element, it depends also on the level of centring and intentionality of the system that exercises it. Therefore, it varies according to the other elements that contribute to the level of centring. Two groups within a collectivity, making use of similar resources, can even produce total paralysis or neutralisation of the impact of the encompassing system. The potential exercise of power varies, in addition, with the position of a social system in the general hierarchy of its inclusive interactive settings, but this is not a necessary correlation.

I want to dissociate what was called above the **potency** of collective subjectivities from any direct association with their level of centring and intentionality. The causal impact a social system has in social life, although it hinges on these factors, is linked to these other elements too. The impact that certain loosely organised social movements, classes, intellectual trends and similarly faintly centred subjectivities exercise can be of paramount importance. One might say that only a deep-seated presupposition in Western culture is responsible for this stress on **activism**, which of course requires a high level of centring and intentionality. This is the background, for instance, to Etzioni's high praise for the "active society", "in charge" of itself - "aware, committed and potent".⁵ But, as Weber's studies, to take just one case, demonstrated, this is not a universally held belief.⁶ A lesser level of both those factors does not, thus, mean diminished impact in social life, for it can

⁵A. Etzioni, *The Active Society*, pp. 4-5.

⁶See, for instance, M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, v. I, Berkeley/ Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1978 (1921/2), pp. 551ff.

be conceived of in a much looser manner as spanning over the long-term. Moreover, the historical context wherein this impact is to be felt must receive due attention.

To be sure, the rhythm of unfolding and the configuration of social systems, as much as that of other social systems that stand in direct or indirect relation with one another, is always affected by their level of centring. In the short term, the higher this level, the greater the capacity a social system has to shape its rhythms and configurations, and the greater the impact a social system has upon other systems. In the long run, however, this is not necessarily the case. Not only may this impact not last in subsequent developments, but it is also quite possible for loosely organised movements and other diverse social systems to exert a less immediate, though far-reaching impact upon the unfolding of social processes. Not even the direct association between centring and activism inexorably obtains, as shall be seen with reference to the Protestant sects below.

We need at last to bring these elements together and specify the impact collective subjectivities exercise in social life. It should be borne in mind in the course of the following that social systems contribute to the establishment of their interactive settings and to their mutual constitution through precisely those interactive processes.

The ideas herein proposed are not meant to contribute to a rigid deductive model, although they might help built instrumental ones with restricted reach. They are rather envisaged as advancing a controlling frame of reference, against which empirical research should be gauged. It sums up knowledge,

furnishes concepts, insights, queries and clues to empirical inquiries.⁷ The historical and specific settings onto which the proposals I want to put forward are to be applied demand, therefore, attention and proper investigation: social sciences work with **open** systems; their variables often escape control, definition and measure, and even identification.⁸ The more rigidly structured a social system the more it is likely that deductive schemes can be clearly devised and mathematically formalised, since the number of surprises that are likely to come up in the course of the investigation tend to be lower, exactly as a consequence of that rigidity. Not by accident, it is in economics that such schemes are often developed.

With these caveat and provisions, I shall treat those factors as **variables** that have a differentiated impact upon the constitution of social systems. Three different types of variables need to be defined at the outset.⁹ The first is what will be called **independent** variables, since they may be specified without reference to other variables in the theoretical scheme, notwithstanding the possibility of breaking them down into other internal variables if one wishes to do so. The second will be named **dependent**: they are directly derived from an independent variable alone. Finally, the third ones will be christened

⁷T. Parsons, E. A. Shils *et al.*, "Some Fundamental Categories of the Theory of Action", in *Towards a General Theory of Action*, p. 3.

⁸R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, p. 21, and *A Realist Theory of Science*, chap. 2. This seems, however, to be also increasingly the case in the natural sciences.

⁹For a discussion of this sort of problem, in ways I shall not follow, see T. Parsons, "An Approach to Psychological Theory in Terms of the Theory of Action", pp. 631ff.

resultant variables, insofar as they obtain when those variables (independent or dependent) are crossed. These are **analytical** devices which are thought out so as to provide means of assessing the interactive processes of collective subjectivities, therein regarded as units. Whether or not the values of these variables could find mathematical expression is an issue that will not occupy us, although I believe it might be the case, as we can see in other areas of the social sciences.

Level of centring (**LC**) - or, conversely, decentring, perspectives (**P**) and organic constitution (**OC**) are, thus, independent variables: they can be analytically defined on their own, providing we do not attach any privileged causation to them, in particular the two latter. Position in the social hierarchy (**PSH**), although concretely dependent upon a range of factors, will be isolated and treated also as an independent variable and so will be might (**M**), i.e. the capacity a unit possesses to make use of resources outside itself - a possible link between them notwithstanding in concrete terms. Space-time (**ST**) is a dimension which, although concretely influenced by the others, is analytically independent. Level of intentionality (**LI**), dispositions (**D**) and direction of interactive inclinations (**II**) are dependent variables. Whilst the first derives from the level of centring of the collectivity, the second and the third can be deduced from the system's perspective, in connection, moreover, with its organic constitution. Potency (**PO**) will be called a resultant, for it is ultimately consequent upon the interaction of a number of other independent and dependent variables: level of centring, thus the level of intentionality; the perspectives and the organic constitution, thus the collective dispositions,

leading to the conformation of the interactive inclinations; the social system's position in the social hierarchy; and finally its might. Potency needs, however, to be regarded as a broad variable too, which, alongside the space-time dimension - and other variables (OV) that possibly remain unknown or are at least specific to the historical, interactive, situation - finally yields the ultimate impact (I) of a given collective subjectivity upon a social process, in the short or the long run.

A graphic representation of these relations acquires the following aspect:

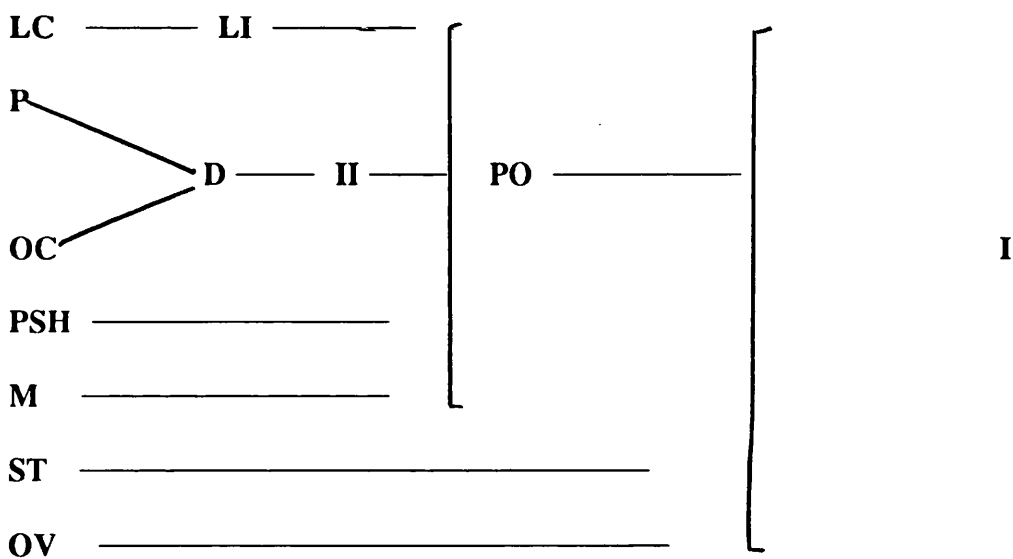


FIGURE I

This detailed enumeration of variables does not imply that all of them must concur in the construction of the *explananda* at every stage in the course of whatever investigation. This may certainly be the case, but it seems more

likely that some factors will be more important than others in specific instances. What should not be lost from sight is the general reference provided by the frame, which may help sustain a general awareness of **multidimensional** questions with reference to collective causality.

A last caveat: the frame of reference proposed above refers to one single social system. Its concrete application must, however, be carried out with a concern with the interactive relations between two or more collectivities. They not only shape their encompassing system jointly - even if in radical opposition: they shape each other as well, in accordance with their own capacity of impact. But there is no reason why one should imagine that the capacity of impact of collectivities necessarily entails a zero-sum game. It may well be the opposite that obtains.

III)DECENTRING, THE PROTESTANT SECTS AND MODERNITY

I want now to explore a specific and concrete example in order not only to illustrate the main ideas and concepts hitherto developed, but also to exemplify the general applicability and possibilities for this frame of reference. I hope to be able to draw attention to a neglected aspect of a much commented on issue and, in so doing, I shall endeavour to bring together two schools of thought which have developed separately, giving origin to what Klaus Eder has called the "European/ American divide in the study of social movements".¹⁰ The cultural-developmental orientation of that strand - central to Weber's and

¹⁰K. Eder, *The New Politics of Class*, pp. 5 and 48ff.

Habermas' discussions, for instance - will be coupled with the "resource mobilization approach", which pays great heed to issues of practical organisation, which have been dear to activists, but not so much to social scientists.

As noted above, the idea that the most effective causal impact upon the world is necessarily produced by a very centred, cohesive and delimited entity has been central to the Western tradition over the last few centuries: its conception of the subject rests, as we have seen, upon this presupposition. The subjectivism of the Reformation and the rationalisation of daily conduct introduced by Calvinism are at the roots of such a vision. Those individuals chosen by God should show their qualities as the Lord's elect through an increasing pattern of control over themselves, entailing asceticism as a consequence of a strongly delimited and purposive ego, which ought to dedicate itself, in its loneliness, to the transformation of the environment. "In-world asceticism" was Weber's famous characterisation of this cultural pattern, a popular type of Calvinism which crept in out of the terrifying uncertainty about the designs of an inscrutable God and His verdict on those predestined either to enter the Kingdom of Heaven or doomed to Hell, as originally proposed in Calvin's theology. Activity in the world was, therefore, introduced to counteract "feelings of religious anxiety".¹¹ Parsons took up these ideas

¹¹M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Unwin, 1930 (1904/5), especially p. 112.

when he defined the American cultural tradition as basically an inheritor of that view, speaking of "in-world activism".¹²

As has already been remarked, other religions did not bank on the same sort of belief, preferring other forms of dealing with the world. In terms of the potential to transform the environment, however, there appears to be little contemporary disagreement regarding the instrumentality of this sort of pattern of conduct for the realisation of mundane deeds. This was the gist of Weber's thesis on the role of the Protestant ethic and its release of the economic forces of a new sort of - rationalised - capitalism. This is however unambiguous at the individual level only. When we bring the notion of collective subjectivity into the plot a certain change in the argument must take place. Centred organisations have become crucial in the workings of capitalism; in contrast, if we focus on the part played by Protestant sects in the making of the contemporary world, the whole scene is altered.

Most of the discussions on the impact of Protestantism and its offsprings in the modern world have concentrated on the debate about the magnitude of the influence of ideas, versus material forces, which Weber supposedly played off against Marx. Much light has been thrown on the cultural innovation represented by the (instrumental) rationalisation of daily conduct, or even, as more recently, in Habermas' case, on another side of the rationalisation process, i.e. that of morals and the law.¹³ Weber realised that the ascetic

¹²T. Parsons, "A Tentative Outline of American Values", in R. Robertson and B. S. Turner, eds., *Talcott Parsons, Theorist of Modernity*, pp. 47-58.

¹³J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, B. I, pp. 254, 305-6, 381ff.

rationalism of the Puritans affected the organisation and daily life of social groups, "from the congregational level all the way up to the national state"; but he did not pursue this line of inquiry.¹⁴ Culture, world-views, were, in his case, subsequently, at the heart of the controversy. Short shrift has been given to **organisational** factors in the development of the Protestant sects by sociologists, as Zaret recently noted and tried to remedy with respect to England.¹⁵

When this aspect is granted weight, the problem of collective subjectivity necessarily stands out. What is at stake, thus, is the reach of what I shall call the dialectics of **activism** and **decentring**, which accorded those sects their prodigious impact upon the making of the contemporary West. In a previous chapter (7.IV), I observed that collective causality is absent in Weber's assessment of intentional conduct. This will now be made clear in relation to a concrete example, for we will have occasion to see that "organizational features of Puritanism" - as well as of other sects - "mediate actively between economic and ideological realities".¹⁶ The faith on a direct association between centring and impact will be challenged and the interactive inclinations of collective subjectivities will have their importance underscored. The hermeneutic and organic constitution of social systems will be touched upon,

¹⁴R. Bendix, *Max Weber. An Intellectual Portrait*, London, Heinemann, 1966 (1960), p. 87.

¹⁵David Zaret, *The Heavenly Contract*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 6.

¹⁶Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 11.

as well as their space-time dimension and the structuring aspects of social life in the period.

Protestantism was born with Luther and his reformist, which created a schism with the Roman hierarchy. It extended its doctrinaire divergencies and influence through Calvin's preaching and governance in Geneva. It was in England, nonetheless, and with its eventual expansion in America, that it pushed through a deeper rupture with the Catholic Church. Puritanical **separatism** within the Church of England progressively grew in strength up to the stage at which, frustrated in its hopes of receiving support from the Royalty, it chose to concentrate all its energies on the colonisation of the New World, alongside the multiplicity of other sects that emerged in the period.

Within the Church in general a double-edged phenomenon has already, according to Weber, to be reckoned with. On the one hand, clergypersons sustain a relation of **domination** over the other members of the religious community; on the other, the Church as a whole represents a "constellation" of material and ideal interests.¹⁷ Legitimate authority plus feelings of solidarity and commonality of interest, dispositions and interactive inclinations provide for the structuring of the institution. The influence of a laity progressively more autonomous economically from the feudal and Monarchical encompassing environment enormously grew substantially in England during the seventeenth century. Clergymen were caught up in the uncomfortable situation of having to answer both to the institutionalised hierarchy of the

¹⁷R. Bendix, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

church and to a, by and large, gradually more radicalised laity.¹⁸ At first these groups were located in the cities; the development of capitalism in the countryside lent greater power to this strata, which was, considerably at least, related to the new "price-making" (that is self-regulated) markets. Under this practical leverage these rising social groups transferred the ideas of **possessive individualism** and **contract**, which prevailed in those markets, to religious matters. A new concept of **covenant** was thus born, implying specific procedures of internal structuring. The Puritanical but non-separatist movement within the English Church affirmed a one-sided contract of God with men, after the model of the Old Testament; the separatist movements insisted on a mutually binding and negotiated contract between men and God.¹⁹ The path to the fragmentation of the Church was open: its mediating role between divine and human spheres could now be questioned.

The eschatological, apocalyptic view that received its first formulation in Luther's writings, and was later on embraced with a major role attributed to this country, by English reformers, was ultimately forced in the direction of a New World because of the resistance of the Anglican Church to deeper reformation. For Luther and those other writers, the split from the Roman Church was legitimated by the fact that it was taking place on the eve of the Final Judgement. It inaugurated, therefore, a new sacred time in the sacred space of Europe and, finally, specifically in England - the community chosen

¹⁸D. Zaret, *op. cit.*, p. 14. Technically, the printing revolution fostered a laicisation of culture, furnishing further impulse to this process.

¹⁹Idem, *Ibid.*, pp. 17 and 135ff.

by God to play a paramount role in human Redemption. America, in its "wilderness", became the new sacred space of that new sacred time.²⁰ Immersed in that symbolism, they launched themselves upon the adventure of colonisation, with its expanding frontier and accelerated transformation of the environment, impelled by the asceticism and "in-world" activism of dissidents. Thereby they shaped the actual space-time dimension of what eventually formed the United States - Virginia's royal colonies apart - as well as their economy, culture and first institutions.

These sects depended financially on their members much more closely than they ever did in Europe.²¹ The resource's for their (organic) constitution basically came from this source. This is the element behind Weber's stress on **voluntarism** in his characterisation of these sects. They therefore reflected more immediately, the desires and perspectives of the local communities from which they drew their congregation hence, as had already occurred in England although only in part. However, success in individual terms was valued not only because it confirmed the state of grace of the sects' members, but because it was regarded as a sign of collective election by God. **Activism** was as pivotal to the success of the individual as to the expansion of the sect.²² This last aspect was reinforced by active proselytism, whereby new converts were

²⁰Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

²¹M. Weber, "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism", in *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, p. 302.

²²Idem, *Ibid.*, p. 322.

gained, although all these sects, according to Simmons, tended eventually to become more concerned with their own consolidation.²³

A chief aspect of this process was what McLoughlin, echoing Troeltsch, characterises as a dialectics between, on the one hand, a desire for respectability plus order and, on the other, a search for religious freedom.²⁴ Initially fighting for toleration, new, minority sects became stifled and tended to become Churches, just to be challenged once again by new sects. First Puritans, then Antinomians, Baptists and Quakers, followed by Freewill Baptists, Shakers, Universalists, Methodists, and, a stage later, Adventists, Perfectionists, Mormons, and finally Pentecostal and Holiners - all those groups strived towards toleration and, once they had overcome initial resistances, looked forward to more general, spiritual and political, control and influence.

²³R. C. Simmons, *The American Colonies*, London, Longman, 1976, pp. 209ff.

²⁴William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent 1630-1833*, v. I, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. xviii-xix. For Troeltsch, who conceptualised the dialectics of centring and decentring in religious life, the differences between Church and sect were "quite clear": "The Church is that type of organization which is overwhelmingly conservative, which to a certain extent accepts the secular order, and dominates the masses; in principle, therefore, it is universal, i.e. it desires to cover the whole life of humanity. The sects...are comparatively small groups; they aspire after personal inward perfection, and they aim at a direct personal fellowship between the members of each group". Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, v. I, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1960 (1911), p. 331. It should be noted that, although much more centralised, throughout its history the Catholic Church has also undergone internal movements of decentring, which are usually expressed in new orders, from the Franciscans to the Jesuits. Their role in the colonisation of America can hardly be overestimated.

We can see that, on the basis of the idea of a **radical covenant**, the dynamic of **decentring** was fundamental to the accomplishments of Protestantism. Rather than a centred and unified movement, it was a fragmented one which guaranteed the widespread development of capitalism in the American colonies. The close relationship between community and Protestant sects was essential to this outcome. The so-called "elective affinity", however, cannot be examined in cultural terms alone, as the consonance between bourgeois strata and certain, in-world activist and ascetic patterns of behaviour. Two phenomena stand out, allowing for the connection of the movement as a whole with the broader social system, especially to the emergent bourgeois classes. The relational perspective of the movement, founded on a specific, contractually inspired, manner of recruiting followers - which, furthermore, provided for its ties with the emergent ruling classes of North-America and, consequently, for good positioning within the social hierarchy²⁵ - matched other social developments unfolding at that moment. The low level of centring of the movement - despite the high level of centring of its individual followers and their activism and that of the individual sects, which on their own may be classified as organisations - in turn afforded the concretisation of those relational perspectives and the style of structuring. **Social relations and collective subjectivity** must be borne in mind when the

²⁵The importance of belonging to a sect and thus being recognised as a trustable person was highlighted by Weber; otherwise not only social exclusion tended to follow but business opportunities would diminish. This helped bring about the instrumental utilisation of Protestantism by a number of captains of industry and commerce, as previously observed (in chap. 8.IV). See M. Weber, "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism", pp. 304ff.

impact of the Protestant sects is dwelled upon in association with the emergence of capitalist modernity, in particular when we refer to its consummation in the United States of America.²⁶

To be sure, the dynamic of the Protestant sects was not solely responsible for the development of capitalism either in England, Germany or Holland, but only in part, since they were not completely victorious in these areas. In France this is even less the case. It is true, too, that Weber later introduced other factors, much closer to Marx's view, so as to explain the rise of capitalism and modernity.²⁷ But, to the extent that the Protestant sects retain their relevance in this connection, especially in America, their collective causality and the relations they maintained with other collective subjectivities must be given due attention. It may help in going beyond individual causality and the introduction of world-views in society at large, bringing in the dialectical relations between movement and other systems, social classes and the encompassing "environment".

²⁶Of course, this does not detract from the possibility that, at another level, a broader collective identity was necessary, and that the very idea of an American nation was born out of the strain brought about by the fragmentation of sects which, having rejected the organicism of Anglicanism, needed some other form of (partial) "universalism". This is suggested by Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964, p. 11.

²⁷See R. Collins, *Weberian Sociology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 19ff.

IV)A REITERATION OF BASIC CONCEPTS

Finally it will be useful to state, in a concise form, the main conclusions reached in the development of this discussion on contemporary syntheses in sociological theory and the theory of collective subjectivity. They are the following:

1)Social systems are systems of action, made up of individual actors and, as soon as we depart from elementary units, other social systems. Their internal constitution comes about interactively. They comprise a communicative aspect, although the interaction of their units includes not only argumentative and symbolic operations, but also power relations as well as the transformation of the organic natural world. Social systems are, therefore, sets of ongoing interactions, which unfold as time and are shaped as social space.

2)The interactive processes that constitute social systems possess properties that cannot be reduced to their individual units or to other social systems. The extent to which these properties, in the hermeneutical dimension, are internalised by individual actors is, moreover, contingent and vary in each concrete case. The construction of structures is a worthwhile tool in the analysis of social systems. We should be careful, though, not to attribute ontological existence to them. The relative level of homogeneity or heterogeneity of a social system must be accounted for when such a construction of structures is undertaken.

3)The constitution of social systems is multidimensional. On the one hand, it contains a hermeneutic dimension, which I call their perspectives, whereby

their internal dynamic and the external interactive setting are perceived and judged. On the other hand, it contains a material dimension, which I call their organic constitution, whereby they carry out their interchange with the organic material world. Both dimensions are always present in any social system, and they are some of the cardinal properties of the interactive processes that shape them, in the course of which a space-time social dimension is also produced. Other properties consist of power relations, collective dispositions and interests, interactive inclinations, and so forth.

4) Individuals are able to exert efficient causality, since they act, more or less reflexively, by impulse or routine - in any case, intentionally, notwithstanding the permanent possibility of unintended consequences of their action coming about. Social systems possess a sort of efficient causality over themselves, which may be understood in terms of influence. They signify the two sorts of causality, conditioning and active, to which I have referred throughout these pages. The first one is a property of social systems, which cannot be reduced to their individual members. It is, in fact, the impact collectivities exert on their units - other collectivities and individuals. Another causal property of social systems must be, however, introduced, for it has not received proper heed from sociological theory. Whereas conditioning causality has - almost without exception, if sometimes *ad hoc* - been accepted, a more active causality has too often been denied to social systems. This causal property is what I have called collective causality: thence the notion of collective subjectivity ensues, for the cognizance of this property entails the attribution

of a precise characterisation to social systems, which implies causality, but also interaction, dialectics and reflexivity.

5) Individual actors, or even social systems that constitute units of other, inclusive social systems, may or may not be aware of the role they play in the constitution of a collective causality. They may behave intentionally to foster or thwart it, or else they may be completely oblivious to it. Their contribution to the constitution of a collective causality may be intentional or just an unintended consequence of their action. Similar to individual action, which is as a rule only relatively reflexive, the interplay of the action of individuals in interactive processes brings about a collective subjectivity, whose level is also relative. It cannot be taken for granted, requiring examination in each concrete case.

6) The extent to which a collective subjectivity has a compact constitution - that is the extent to which it has a distinct identity, strong decision-making centres, clear-cut boundaries, explicit internal roles and cohesion - is also relative. Its level should not be regarded as high *a priori*. For the same reason, collectivities that do not fit into this tight model should not be excluded from the category of collective subjectivities.

7) *Qua* collectivities, social systems are constituted not in isolation, but in interaction with other social systems. Thereby their constitution is directly, or indirectly, influenced by the causality of other social systems. These interactions are of many kinds, from close collaboration to overt hostility, and hinge on the perspectives and dispositions of the social system regarding its environment, which produce its interactive inclinations.

8)The potency of a collective subjectivity, i.e. its capacity of impact upon other collectivities, depends, thus, on a range of factors. The levels of centring and intentionality are exceedingly important, but potency cannot be directly derived from them. The perspectives and the organic constitution of the social system are also important in this regard. We must be attentive to the relation between the space-time dimension and potency, for, apparently ineffective in the short run, the impact of a social system upon the unfolding of another system may turn out to be paramount in the long run.

9)Social hierarchies must always be reckoned with: they express the advantaged or disadvantaged position a system occupies in relation to other systems. It may also determine the access social systems have to resources that might furnish instruments for the exercise of power and, therefore, participate in the increase of their potency, although this is not necessarily the case.

10)In short, social life must be considered in terms of a multiplicity of interactions between individual actors and collective subjectivities, which are intertwined in uneven and shifting ways. Social change and relative permanence are to be understood in this light. Neither individualistic nor most of the other more complete frameworks have, however, been entirely able to take stock of this reality, insofar as collective subjectivity has too often been a neglected concern. The cross-fertilisation of contemporary syntheses in sociological theory with the few theories of collective subjectivity available, in their remaking, is intended to overcome this shortcoming. This was the purpose of this study.

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