

# Introduction

This book is not an encyclopaedic survey of the most influential or important sociological theories of the 20th century; nor is it an institutional history of sociological theory. It is not a textbook, a distillation of the accumulated knowledge of a particular discipline; nor is it a crib, a set of ready-made and easily-remembered answers to imagined examination questions. It is more of a reader's guide, a series of hints and suggestions for those who, whether students or teachers, believe that sociology is a profession and a discipline but also something more.

Sociology will be understood here as a mode of encounter with the social world and a mode of orientation within that world, and sociological theory as the articulation of the moves, problems and themes that arise in connection with this encounter. Orientation in the social world is a problem for actors as much as it is for professional sociologists, and so the moves, problems, and themes identified here as central to sociological theory will not be thought of as wholly distinct from those germane to living a life and being a competent social animal. Sociology will be understood as a discipline but also as a certain sort of sensibility, a mode of response to the world, a way of seeing. Whether sociological theory can equip anyone for the broader task of living a life will remain an open question, but hints about an answer will be offered towards the end.

Although sociologists are perhaps the last people one should turn to for advice in this direction, and while the personal lives of many of the great sociological theorists could hardly be described as a model for anyone, the life's work of each is its own sort of instruction, being a sustained attempt to construe, constitute, frame, and interpret the social world. In this respect, however eccentric they might have been, they were no different from each one of us, for our social life would not be our social life were it not for our need and ability to frame our experience, to place it 'under a description'. This does not mean that sociological theory is no more than an elaborate and more explicit version of what each of us has to do in order to live a life. If matters were so simple then much of the more baroque sort of sociological theory would be pointless (though some of it may well be), and we could say with Wittgenstein, in a maxim he did not always follow himself, that whatever can be said can be said clearly.

On the contrary, the task of the sociological theorist is always to create a distance towards those phenomena that others routinely treat as self-evident; and it is then to encourage us to see the world a little differently. In this sense the sociological theorist's task is analogous to that of the artist or the novelist who, in establishing a distance towards the world, is bound to introduce a measure of perspective, or one-sidedness, an angle, a particular emphasis at some remove from those that define our implicit or everyday understandings. No sustained

effort to understanding the social world is worthwhile if it thinks that it can dispense with new and even puzzling criteria of significance. As the philosopher and sociologist Helmuth Plessner put it:

... in any artistic representation which penetrates to the spirit of things through appearances, there must be some distortion about the work, some partiality, selectivity, emphasis – in a word, some distancing mechanism – in order to bring the object to light. With different materials and with different means of expression, the good writer and even the historical scholar will obey the same law. In composing his material he must fashion it with a good dose of selectivity and partiality, but in such a way that this hand can be seen to work selectively if the material is to come alive, as the portrait does, and communicate to us in pictorial terms. The forcefulness of even Hegel, or Marx or Spengler, owes its heightened value to this. It brings things to light; it stimulates the inner eye; it gives us different eyes. Exaggerations, figures of speech, bold constructions too, fulfil the same function of perceptual counterfoil to understanding. (Plessner, 1978: 32)

Here we may want to say that there is a difference between the artist or novelist and the sociological theorist, namely that the former addresses our vision more directly than the latter, or that the sense of wonderment or dislocation produced by Goya or Dostoyevsky is greater than that produced by Talcott Parsons or Jürgen Habermas; it is hard to imagine a sane person saying ‘*The Social System* changed my life’, or ‘I read Giddens and the scales fell from my eyes’; it is made harder by the apparent lack of interest among many sociological theorists in serious art or literature either as topic or as model. Sporadic appeals for sociology to be considered an art form have largely fallen on deaf ears (Nisbet, 1976; Brown, 1977). This is not because sociology has moved closer to the natural sciences and embraced their standards of rigour; the picture, rather, is one in which research methods have become increasingly elaborate and sophisticated but at the cost of any capacity to say something significant about society, while theory has become split between the rigorous and systematic work of Niklas Luhmann or Jon Elster and the more nebulous but influential work of Zygmunt Bauman or Ulrich Beck.

The result of this split between what we might call rigour and wisdom is that the problems associated with conceptualising the social for the purposes of a science of society can seem to be distinct from the problems that confront modern people in their efforts to make sense of and live their lives. While such a distinction is important, and while the task of the more rigorous sociological theorists might be said to be the preservation of the discipline’s identity, the distinctiveness of sociological theory also consists in something more than the capacity to manipulate concepts: it is an attitude of mind. In order to convey something of this I have organised the book in terms of theoretical tools and devices that sociological theorists use and the problems and difficulties that can be involved when they try to use them; this is not, then, a normative exercise in the elaboration of theoretical principles.

Nor for that matter is it organised around the substantive problems of our time, interesting though these are. Clearly it is important to know what Weber thought about the future of rationalised societies, how Durkheim saw the

prospects for socialism or how Adorno saw contemporary culture; it is interesting to reflect on whether democracies are made more robust by reducing the proportion of the population working in agriculture, on the apparent reversal in the relationship between the dynamics of work and family life in post-industrial economies, or on the role played by the relationship between globalisation and risk in the formation of modern or postmodern conceptions of individuality. But knowing what particular sociologists say 'about' these things will not tell you about the kinds of sociologist they are, about their intellectual style. And intellectual style is what matters here. There may be substantive differences between Marx and Parsons over private property or the direction in which they thought modern western societies were heading, but more important here is that it may also be true that both make use of clear conceptual hierarchies. Parsons may not have been a Marxist yet his conceptualisation of power owes much to the way in which he conceptualises money; his conclusions about power are also remarkably similar to those reached by Michel Foucault, a very different sort of thinker. Functionalism and Marxism have traditionally been seen as different ways of thinking, yet functionalism, premised unquestionably on conservative assumptions, has proved remarkably fruitful for many versions of Marxism and neo-Marxism in the 20th century; indeed, many of the more colourful and exotic efforts at theorising that one encounters in sociology today are frequently accompanied by a ritual invocation of independent variables such as class, gender, ethnicity, and age that are drawn straight from a functionalist lexicon.

It is in the spirit of such observations that apparently unrelated thinkers will be placed in some proximity to one another rather than being separated into schools or traditions. They will be compared with one another, though there will be no suggestion of an independent standard against which they might all be measured; neither will there be the remotest prospect of amalgamating them into a grand synthesis. The approach adopted here is perhaps best described as 'theoretical liberalism', a term that sounds woolly but which is inspired by something that the political theorist Isaiah Berlin used to say. Berlin thought that even if we could arrive at a definitive theory of justice, or freedom, or equality, or beauty, or democracy, or truth, these liberal values, worthy though they may be in themselves, perhaps even transcending all human prejudices, are irreducible to one another; therefore, any attempt to organise society in such a way as to realise them all at the same time was utopian, and likely to end in tyranny. The task of a liberal society was to find ways of negotiating the conflicts between these equally valid principles (Berlin, 1997). Now our problem is the relationship between sociological theories rather than between liberal values and, as such, a less consequential enterprise. But its history may also be written as one in which one theorist produces a brilliant theory of one aspect or dimension of social life – the state, religion, emotions, gender, science – while another theorist does the same in another field, or one theorist writes an abstract theory of society that makes sense of an aspect of social experience while failing to say much about others. And it is also marked by attempts by some theorists to synthesise these major breakthroughs in particular fields into

a single science of society. Indeed, few sociological theorists have entirely lacked this kind of utopian, theoretically illiberal ambition. Plessner's idea, then, that the good writer or social thinker fashions his material with partiality or selectivity, needs to be qualified by the observation that many of our heroes believe that they are doing more than this, that they are seeking and, so they believe, finding, definitive answers to basic questions, bringing to an end a search that was begun by their predecessors. Many have sought to show, for instance, how their work addresses both broad questions of social structure and the role of human agency, the large and the small scale, conflict and consensus, history and order, and so on. Yet they all failed; the light they cast on one thing was bound not to fall on something else, and the work of all of them can be read, and will be read here, as a story about the limits of inquiry, limits run up against and limits overstepped.

In order to convey a sense of these limits I have organised the book in a way that may strike some readers as peculiar. For instance, I have chosen not to have chapters on 'ontology', 'epistemology', 'methodology', 'agency and structure', 'conflict and consensus' and so on; similarly, the different schools or national traditions of theory have been discussed so many times before that nothing new could come of doing so here; there are also many good collections of essays about individual thinkers. All of these approaches have their virtues: there *are* basic principles of theorising, there *have* been schools of theory, and most theorists *have* been men and women sitting alone at their desks thinking ... or at least writing. Here I try something different and offer 'classics and canons', 'description', 'categories', 'metaphors', 'diagrams', 'cynicism and scepticism', and finally 'sociological theory and the art of living'. The point of this will be to allow us to compare the ways in which different thinkers use or misuse the same tools, to keep returning to themes addressed in previous chapters, and to discuss the same thinker in more than one chapter. Each chapter will address only a few theorists but, hopefully, the points made about each will be general enough to provide the reader with a way of seeing the work of many others. In any case, the idea is to deepen our acquaintance with sociological theory by a process of re-reading, the result of which ought to be that our sense of how a particular theorist thinks will be different at the end from what it was at the beginning.

It will also hopefully have the virtue of allowing us to see with different eyes a standard question in the philosophy of social science, namely that of whether sociology is a science or an art; for it seems to me the normative question that is usually asked here, namely whether sociology should be a science or an art, is less interesting than that of whether a theorist's actual use of a device pushes his or her inquiry in the direction of science or in the direction of art or literature.

The book is devoted almost entirely to the work of familiar figures, and many names that some readers may think important are left out. Hopefully, the points I make about the selected few will be clear enough for those readers to have them in mind when reading the work of their own favourites. On the other hand, I do think that as university teachers we are the custodians of a tradition of inquiry, and so the book begins with the idea of a sociological

classic, albeit one in which ‘classic’ will mean something a little broader than usual; there are classic statements of problems and classic mistakes as well as classic examples of inspiration. Indeed, a confrontation with intellectual failure can be as instructive as a confrontation with greatness, so that the term ‘classic’ is retained but as part of a discussion that goes beyond the question of tradition or debates between those who love old books and those who lament the baleful influence of dead white men. There are, incidentally, some things to say about the practice of directing criticism at people on the basis of ascriptive categories, especially when they are no longer there to defend themselves, but beyond this the criterion governing the selection of material here is intellectual stimulation, with the proviso that such stimulation will have to be as much a product of what can be read into the material as of the assumed effect that it has on the inexperienced reader; just as the attraction of classic texts is that they might help us to see with different eyes, so the task of a reader’s guide like this is to make it easier for them to have that effect.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which any discussion of the sociological classics is the product of a traditional attitude, and has to be motivated by the thought that when he or she is not being encouraged to do ‘group projects’ as preparation for the world of team working, the student of sociology is, as much as the student of literature, a lone reader sitting at a desk with a book, engaging in a dialogue with other minds as well as with himself or herself.

The student is also a social actor and the second chapter, on description, attempts to do justice to this by addressing the most general task that social actors confront, namely the need to see the social world from one point of view rather than another, as having significance. ‘Description’ here will not refer to something we do before doing something more serious, such as explaining, but is a general term for the way in which we order our world and find our way about in it. In exploring some of the difficulties encountered by the sociologist in his or her efforts to describe – levels of abstraction, amount of detail, formality of presentation, completeness, use of terminology, translatability into another idiom – the chapter on description points up dilemmas we all face as actors for whom language is the primary means of getting about. The problem it addresses is actually an ancient one, reaching back to the time when our ancestors constructed myths as a means of dealing with a dangerous or troubling reality. Hans Blumenberg’s formulation of this, while it appears to mock the terms on which it is understood in this book, is worth quoting:

The ‘art of living’ – that primary skill, which has become obsolete even as a phrase, of dealing with and husbanding oneself – had to be acquired as a faculty for dealing with the fact that man does not have an environment that is arranged in categories and that can be perceived exclusively in its ‘relevances’ for him. To have a world is always the result of an art, even if it cannot be in any sense a universal artwork. (Blumenberg, 1985: 7)

If the problem of description, seeing the social world as significant, as having contours, is the most general one we know, the rest of the book consists of variations on it.

The following chapter examines the role of categories, as devices we use to create significance for ourselves. As we have been taught by writers from Jorge Luis Borges to Oliver Sacks, an inability to classify appropriately, be it through over-attention to detail or an inability to perceive anything other than abstract forms, is the mark of a cognitive and also a social failure. Borges' stories are full of the problems of this sort, and the intuitions behind them are shared by philosophers from Aristotle to Kant and by sociologists and anthropologists from Durkheim and Mauss to Mary Douglas, who thought that you could understand much of how a society worked by understanding its dominant systems of classification. The problem of finding our way about, however, is not exhausted by the problem of classification; as theorists in the phenomenological tradition have shown, the lineaments of a shared culture are sustained not only by the capacity of classificatory systems to transcend time and place and acquire a measure of permanence; there is also an art of typification, in which the attribution to individuals of certain categories of social membership is a live performance.

If categorisation is central to social competence, it is also central to sociology. No version of sociology can operate without categories, a banal enough statement until you realise that from its inception sociology has been beset by a division between radically distinct approaches to categorisation; three of these will be discussed: classificatory, dialectical and ideal typical; their chief representatives will be Talcott Parsons, Theodor Adorno and Max Weber. After giving Parsons more of a run for his money than he usually gets these days we will see how, for the latter two, 'merely classificatory' reason restricted the scope of inquiry, and how both saw the need to overcome classification and develop more dynamic and flexible ways of theorising.

If Parsons' work is a site on which to demonstrate the shortcomings of a classificatory approach to sociology, it is also in its later form a surprisingly fine illustration of the role of metaphor in sociology. His conceptualisation of society 'as' a system is just one case in which metaphor is used in sociology not just as a decorative device but as something on which the entire course of an inquiry is dependent. Other metaphors of this sort – what Paul Ricoeur calls metaphor at the level of discourse – include drama, text, game, network and so on. Metaphor may also operate at the level of words, in individual sentences, as a means of dramatising an observation rather than structuring an entire argument. In either case metaphor reminds us of the extent to which theorising – the use of concepts – depends upon what is pre-conceptual. Our focus in this chapter will be both the pervasiveness and seeming unavailability of metaphor and also the ways in which metaphor can both open up new horizons for inquiry but also close them off; or if you prefer a different image, some theories take flight as a result of their deployment of metaphor and others become trapped by them.

Part of the discussion of metaphors will be about the relationship between metaphors, models and imagery, and this will lead into a chapter on the role of diagrams in sociological theory. At first sight this may appear a marginal issue, but it becomes less so when we realise the extent to which theorists have had

resort to diagrams. Students in particular can be puzzled by these: what are these boxes and arrows and strange shapes trying to tell us? Do they provide the theorist with what Mike Lynch has called a 'pictorial work space' (Lynch, 1991) in which the theorist achieves something he or she cannot achieve through words alone? Or are they merely a didactic tool, a means of simplifying a theory for the reader's benefit? In so far as they are more than mere decoration or illustration, we can ask about the work they do, about whether they, like categories and metaphors, are an aid or a hindrance to inquiry.

Although attending to the differences between the ways in which theorists make use of categories, metaphors and diagrams does not tell the whole story, it can take us some way towards an appreciation of their intellectual sensibilities. Nevertheless, a sixth chapter brings together themes introduced earlier and tries to refocus the discussion in terms of more basic attitudes to inquiry. Although no sociological approach to the world has taken anything at face value or accepted self-evidence where the chance to propose new ways of seeing has offered itself, there are different ways of destroying self-evidence. I focus on two of these, and call them 'cynicism' and 'scepticism', though in a way that owes little to the venerable philosophical traditions that bear these names. The difference between them becomes apparent when we observe their effects on the study of culture. The difficulty both face is that, while sociological analysis can destroy culture's self-evidence and propose new ways of seeing, culture – novels, plays, poetry, music – is itself a destroyer of self-evidence, already an achieved distance, a new way of seeing in its own right. Indeed, this is what makes some novelists better literary critics than the professionals (Kundera, 1995, 2007; Grossman, 2006). The sceptical sociologist will be defined as one who, while suspicious of culture's purity or autonomy vis-à-vis other aspects of social life, knows that sociology's claims to know better than a novel or a poem or a painting rest on shaky ground; the cynic will be defined as one who, whether or not he or she believes that sociology is a science – and some cynics do believe this – believes that the point of inquiry is to get behind or beneath appearances to the 'real' forces at work in the social world, to see the artistic achievement of distance as the erection of a further piece of self-evidence that itself needs to be dismantled.

The ambition of the cynic and the restraint of the sceptic raise questions about the relationship between scientific and non-scientific reasoning and about the limits of sociology itself. Some cynics harbour the belief that sociology might not only go beyond its own analytical limits but also provide answers to the question of how to live. Against this stands Weber's dictum that science cannot and should not do this. Weber's account of what science can and cannot achieve, however, and his invitation to his students to 'find the demon who holds the very fibres of your life', continues to fascinate us today, even if the context of his remarks has been lost or forgotten. Although Weber raises the question of how to live numerous times in remarks scattered all over his work, he also leaves it hanging in the air. A final chapter, then, explores ways in which sociological theory does or does not imply distinct attitudes to conduct. I call these individual utopias. The work of most theorists does contain a sense, however vague, of how life should be lived;

it is there in Weber or Simmel or Schutz or Adorno or Douglas. But it is also there in literature, often more overtly so. The cynic who wants not only to destroy self-evidence but also to debunk culture is unlikely to be open to the claims of literature here. That position may be contrasted with the more sceptical attitude of Weber, scarcely a week in whose household passed by without Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky being mentioned. In this sceptical spirit I will draw extensively on a novelist who was both an admirer of these artists and a trained scientist, but who also provided us with extended and incomparable accounts of what certain 'individual utopias' might look like. We will see that the three utopias discussed in Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* – the utopias of what he calls exactitude, essayism and everyday life – are defined in terms of the sort of attitudes that we will see cropping up repeatedly in our discussions of the differences between sociological theorists.

Musil was also one of the great modernists for whom the nuances of world-making and of our perceptions of reality were as important as particular substantive belief systems or ideologies. This problem of reality, and the way in which the tools employed by sociological theorists make it possible to address it, is also the central concern of this book.