

CHAPTER ONE. WHAT IS SOCIETY?

What we are witnessing at the moment is that a certain model has become worn out, while former ways of understanding the world have faded.

JEAN-PAUL FITOUSSI & PIERRE ROSANVALLON, *Le Nouvel Age des inégalités*

If, as is granted to us, this synthesis *sui generis*, which constitutes every society, gives rise to new phenomena, different from those which occur in consciousnesses in isolation, one is forced to admit that these specific facts reside in the society itself that produces them and not in its parts – namely its members.

ÉMILE DURKHEIM, *The Rules of Sociological Method*

Norbert Elias begins one of his works by observing that “[e]veryone knows what is meant when the word ‘society’ is used, or at least, everyone thinks he knows.” “One person,” Elias continues, “passes the word on to another like a coin whose value is known and whose content no longer needs to be tested. If one person says ‘society’ and another hears it, they understand each other without difficulty. But do we really understand each other? [...] What kind of formation is it, this ‘society’ that we form together, which has not been intended or planned by any of us, or even all of us together? It only exists because a large number of people exist, it only continues to function because many individual people want and do certain things, yet its structure, its great historical transformations, clearly do not depend on the intentions of particular people” (2001, 3).

Although Elias posed this question as early as 1939, it remains hard to answer in any binding way. Indeed, the term “society” has entered common usage. Weekly magazines often contain sections under this heading and it appears that using this word has become a natural reflex in public discourse. We have grown accustomed to believe that “society” refers to the entirety of the population in a given country. Moreover, we expect this entity to have certain features, even if we, who belong to it, do not find them within ourselves. Finally, we consider it obvious that “society” goes through certain changes, even though attempts to define the direction and nature of its transformations may spark controversy. We no longer ponder what society is, restricting our efforts to asking what its chief characteristics are.

Attempts to describe “society” are also usually associated with providing quantitative data, i.e. quoting indicators and distribution of answers in polls conducted invariably on “representative samples” reflecting a given society’s composition with regard to basic categories such as sex, age, education, region etc. The most widely applied categories used to segment “society” have statistical, usually a priori origins. It is assumed that people who answer a set of questions in a similar way comprise somewhat coherent social groupings or even “electorates,” while a slight differentiation of answers stemming from age or sex differences is treated as a basis for speaking about “men” or “senior citizens” as if they really constituted a group in the sociological sense, or at least a distinguishable whole of some kind.

The seemingly obvious nature of the term “society” becomes particularly striking in the context of the crisis looming over sociology, as has been diagnosed by numerous authors.¹ Among the reasons behind this crisis we can certainly identify changes in Western societies occurring since the 1970s, which entail, on the one hand, the “disintegration of previously existing social forms – for example, the increasing fragility of such categories as class and social status, gender roles, family, neighborhood, etc.,” while on the other – “the collapse of state-sanctioned normal biographies, frames of reference, role models” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1996, 24; emphasis preserved). However, the depth and range of the crisis are also conditioned by factors related to the development of sociology itself. After all, although it has accepted, from its very beginnings, the dual nature of social reality – originating in the actions of people yet appearing as external and objective to them; as something both limiting and directing their actions – sociology has nevertheless failed to come to terms with the problem of the passage from individual actions to resultant social entities.² The dissolution of existing social forms and “the individualization of the society” – as diagnosed by Ulrich Beck and confirmed by most scholars of modernity – only caused the problem to resurface, thus questioning the theoretical usefulness of the very term “society.”

In order to establish why the discipline which introduced the term “society” into common usage and adopted it as the fundamental object of research has ran

1 Interestingly, the claim that sociology is in crisis has been recurring quite regularly since the 1930s when Florian Znaniecki addressed the “deep crisis of sociology” (Znaniecki 2008, 29).

2 This issue has found fullest expression in the discipline’s division into micro and macro sociology.

into such trouble, we have to go back to its roots – the moment when sociology emerged as a distinct academic discipline.

1.1 Classical views on the question of society

For the founding fathers of sociology, society was certainly a key concept that had a par excellence theoretical character. It was an abstract construct encompassing all forms of interdependence among individuals, causing – firstly – that a certain group emerges, characterized by an internally integrated system of actions, which has a more or less permanent character, and secondly – that members of this group act according to certain rules (norms) of interaction which organize their cooperation and which they more or less consciously recognize. In this original interpretation, the society was simply a register of relations between individuals, an epiphenomenon of the mechanisms that coordinate their actions into some identifiable wholes.³

Thus, the proper subject of sociology would be specifically understood processes of *socializing* individual actions, i.e. directing them towards other people and supporting a certain pattern of interactions. It was of the utmost importance for classical sociologists to distinguish various historically determined forms of such processes. Already in his first book – *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893/2013), which contains all basic components of the sociological theory he developed later – Émile Durkheim introduces the distinction between mechanical and organic types of solidarity, viewing them as fundamentally different kinds of the social bonds that constitute the foundations of the traditional society (which he calls “segmentary”) and the modern one in which he lived. Slightly earlier – in 1887 – Ferdinand Tönnies published his most famous study, in which he introduced two terms necessary to grasp a different mechanism of socializing (or of “mutual recognition”): *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, translated (respectively) as “community” and “society.” Examination of the essence of social forms – although disregarding their historical conditioning – was also the main task of sociology according to Georg Simmel (1950), who considered “sociability” to be a pure, i.e. disinterested, form of socializing individual behavior.

3 The concept of coordination does not have a reconciliatory meaning here as it does not preclude conflict or change; it only indicates that the effects of an individual's actions are dependent on the others' actions.

In contrast to Simmel, however, most authors of classical sociology argued that society cannot be defined by referring solely to its morphological features.⁴ This stemmed both from the multiplicity of real forms taken by such internally integrated communities, and from the fact that observable emergences of some group's morphological features can be entirely coincidental and not of a systemic character.⁵ The diversity of forms in which human society manifests itself – both in regard to the levels of sociality (small groups with direct ties vs. abstract state-communities) and in anthropological terms (tribal communities vs. modern society) – also indicated the necessity to theoretically embrace processes of societal variability or at least indicate their basis.

The interest in the processes of variation was additionally reinforced by the fact that classical sociology, which emerged as academic discipline at the beginning of the nineteenth century, has been developing in an era characterized by a rapid intensification of social changes, often accompanied by all kinds of painful side effects. These changes were all-encompassing, affecting not only the economy, politics and power structures but also such fundamental areas as demographics or strategies of family formation.

Economic changes consisted primarily in accelerated industrialization – a new mode of organization of production processes, which resulted chiefly in mass migration of villagers to cities. In consequence, the particularisms and regionalisms typical for feudal societies crumbled as cities became “melting pots” where new social categories emerged from a myriad of components.

As far as power structures are concerned, in most European countries the nineteenth century was basically the time when the process of breaking down the authority of individual power centers (controlled by aristocratic families) was brought to completion. Consequently, violence was “monopolized” by the increasingly influential nation state. A key role was played in this process by

4 Although they considered this type of research to be vital, they indicated the secondary nature of such scholarship in relation to the “content” of social phenomena. In his sociological project, Durkheim even distinguished a special area which he termed “social morphology.” However, he firmly rejected the definition of sociology coined by Simmel because of its focus on researching social forms. Cf. Durkheim 1981.

5 In this context, Stanislaw Ossowski, one of the best-known Polish sociologists, quotes an anecdote about a ticket clerk working in Warsaw's Teatr Wielki [Grand Theatre], who would sell tickets in such a way as to make the visitors' bald patches form a geometrical pattern visible from the balcony (1967b, 167).

rational bureaucracy, which served as the basic means of organizing administrative structures and additionally functioned as a mechanism of standardizing actions by rooting them in a system of uniform regulations and by improving modes of control.

Politics also underwent intense transformations. Foundations of democracy clearly began to emerge in Europe, accompanied by ideologies, which acted as an instrument of mobilizing social support, crucial for representative democracy. The idea of “civic society” became widespread as a community of individuals engaged in “producing” the public good which, in turn, is managed by the state. Education became vital for nation states because it facilitated standardization of language, promoted writing and broadened common knowledge, all of which shape a sense of national identity and solidarity. Finally, the population itself and its quality became a “good” – hence the rise of health care for children in developed countries at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Lastly, the first demographic transition occurred in the period in question. The nation state, which was in the process of establishing itself, faced a completely new situation. As Foucault observes (1988–1990), earlier forms of power had to cope with a scarcity of life.⁶ In contrast, the nineteenth century brought the leading European countries, especially the British Empire, an excess of life. New opportunities for obtaining the means of living through employment in the industry allowed young men from peasantry to marry before receiving their father’s land. Consequently, the average marriage age lowered, and the total number of marriages increased as well (cf. Gillis 1974). Naturally, this also affected birth rates, which, in turn, led to mass unemployment in the next generation, especially in view of the transition from manufacturing to the factory system.

The above changes – including poverty and overcrowding in urban centers, the collapse of rural lifestyles and the rise of the new citizen who could have (and had) a say in public affairs – were visible to everybody. Experiencing this was accompanied by an acute sense of the collapse of the former social order: a ubiquitous anomie or “anxiety” born “because, certain of these [traditional] duties no longer being grounded on reality, a loosening of ties has occurred that can stop

6 This is aptly illustrated by the problem of workforce in serfdom economy. Due to high mortality rates, there was always a shortage of workers, although this was also affected by peasants fleeing from farms. Hence the restrictive rules regarding “marrying out” and other practices meant to guarantee an “abundance of life” matching the farmstead’s needs. Cf. a broader discussion of these issues in Kula (1983).

only when a new [moral] discipline has become established and consolidated itself” (Durkheim 2013, 318).

Thus, it was the accumulation of symptoms heralding deep changes, accompanied by indications of crisis, that brought sociology to life. These signs undermined the obviousness of directly experienced social life and therefore foregrounded the question about the source of social order. It is worthwhile to note here that the specific “denaturalization” of social life, which lies at the foundation of classical sociology, was a phenomenon extended over time, reaching as far back as to the Enlightenment when the problem of order – not only social order (cf. Szacki 2002, 82) – constituted the principal object of enquiry, or even further back to seventeenth-century social philosophy, which also asked about the source of rules regulating the behavior of individuals and consequently about the roots of social order. To Thomas Hobbes (1998) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (2002), who represent the two above traditions, the existence of societies was not something given by nature, but it demanded justification by referring to various types of social contract. Classical sociologists, in turn, redefine the problem into a question about the difference between old and new forms of collective life.

This question continually recurs in classical sociology, beginning with its forerunners Saint-Simon, Comte and Spencer, along with their naïve evolutionary schemas, through Durkheim, Tönnies and Marx, who referred to more historically grounded analyzes of the “transition to modernity,” and ending with Max Weber, who explicitly ruled out the possibility of distinguishing any stages of social development, but nevertheless continued to revisit the question of social change, introducing a specific boundary between features of earlier forms of social life and those that emerged after the rise of capitalist economy. In other words, it was the final collapse of traditional forms of social order – triggered by processes which originated at the turn of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries (cf. Braudel 1983 & 1992) – that gave rise to society as an object of sociological enquiry, revealing that underneath people’s activities there exists something that organizes them into a certain whole and at the same time ensures its reproduction. It is this “something” that becomes named “society,” displacing older or more specific notions of community, company or civic society.

Thus, one legitimate way to answer the question “what is society” could be to claim that society is a specific, historically distinguishable form of collective life, which began with the rise of capitalist economy and acquired its mature form in the nineteenth century. However, this answer would be incomplete because classical sociology was radically theoretical, i.e. it separated the observed phenomena from the hidden rules supposed to govern them, using the former as

indicators of certain abstract intellectual constructs.⁷ Consequently, on the level of theory, the concept of society usually appears accompanied by another term specifying the dominant principle of socializing human actions.

Nonetheless, such an approach did not mean that the essence of that principle could be grasped just by the analysis of commonplace individual actions. This was particularly emphasized by Durkheim, who argued that “it is not the fact that they are general which can serve to characterize sociological phenomena” because “[w]hat constitutes social facts are the beliefs, tendencies and practices *of the group taken collectively*” (1982, 54; emphasis added). Despite the fact that individuals take action by orienting themselves with regard to certain socially constructed rules, “[n]one of these modes of acting and thinking are to be found wholly in the application made of them by individuals, since they can even exist without being applied at the time” (55). Social facts spread because they are social – not the other way round.

According to Durkheim, the hidden social reality is as objectively real as the physical one. Both are governed by rules that manifest themselves as coercion. We might, for example, consider social reality as entirely subjective until we feel the heavy arm of a policeman on our shoulder, or when our closest turn away from us with disgust. Behind social facts – life crystallized, for example, in the form of marriage rates – is a force of principles and rules, which are arbitrary (like grammar rules) but appear to individuals as something external and “self-evident,” or as laws.

Despite all differences in literal phrasings, a similar approach to this “hidden reality” as the ultimate object of sociological research can be found in Weber. Although Jerzy Szacki rightly emphasizes that “Weber did not in fact need the concept of ‘society’; this ‘collective entity’ was not the subject of his study” (2002, 467), Weber would argue that individual actions – as the basic area of enquiry for social sciences – ought to be analyzed by developing abstract “ideal types” that do not directly refer to reality. Moreover, he often argues that although the “ideas of values” that govern such actions have an arbitrary character because they are rooted in the choice of a meaningful world project, they are as objective for individuals as those encountered in natural sciences (Weber 1949). Thus, the

7 The most famous example is Durkheim’s use of suicide rates as an indicator of social anomie. Distinguishing between observable phenomena and principles governing them – so clear in Durkheim – became an inspiration for Ferdinand de Saussure, contributing to the development of modern linguistics. The specific forms assumed by social life relate to the “social rules” exactly like *parole* (speech) relates to *langue* (language).

aim of social sciences would be to reconstruct the project (i.e. “ideas of values”) that lies at the foundation of human actions, with “ideal types” being the primary means of achieving such a goal.

It should also be noted that in classical theories the principle behind the constitution of society is also the principle that constitutes the individual. The ideal type of intentional and rational actions corresponds – according to Weber – to *homo economicus*, on the one hand, and on the other, to the market-based modern order of the industrial society. Similarly, the ideal type of traditional actions corresponds to *homo sociologicus*, who prioritizes the replication of institutional patterns, and to the traditional order organized around a central image of the world. A similar correspondence can be traced in Durkheim, especially in his reflections on the change in the types of law. In this sense, the problem whether individuals constitute the society or vice versa is not really meaningful in classical sociology. Both options are secondary and derive from the dominant mode of sociality.

Therefore, we would say that the historically experienced radical change in the forms of socializing individual actions was the factor that gave life to sociology and its basic array of problems, at the same time making “society” the discipline’s fundamental theoretical concept and the specific form of collective life born in the nineteenth century.

1.2 Society as an object of enquiry in twentieth-century sociology

If the first critical moment in the formation of sociology as a discipline was related to the emergence of modern society, the second one occurred at the turn of the 1930s and 1940s.⁸ It was at this point that sociology finally took its current shape, i.e. became a strictly scientific discipline that focuses on empirical research rather than theoretical speculations. This time, however, the shift occurred not in Europe but in the United States of America.

The second birth of sociology radically differed from the first one, primarily in terms of historical context. The sociology that developed in the USA in the 1930s did not have to struggle with answering the question: “What is society?” After a period of turbulent social changes, the American society was slowly becoming an increasingly self-evident notion in terms of its ontology, or – to put it more

8 Sociology suffered a period of stagnation in the 1920s.

simply – it just *was*.⁹ The primary task of sociology would therefore consist in seeking, firstly, the most adequate notions that would help explain its lasting existence, and secondly – the most effective ways of examining it.¹⁰

The first task entailed a significant shift of emphasis in the discipline's field as defined in classical sociology: a move away from the question of how a specific type of society is *produced* towards the question of how this social entity, now conceived in abstract terms, is *reproduced*. It ought to be noted that both questions are usually answered in the same way: after all, the basic material used to erect the edifice of the society consists in individual actions. "The society exists only insofar as some people undertake some kind of activity in relation to each other," writes Piotr Sztompka (2002, 45). It seems difficult to undermine this definition. However, the shift of emphasis – from rules that allow speaking about specific types of society to processes of reproducing society as such – radically changed the scope of sociology's fundamental problems. In the first case, researchers focused on the specificity of socializing processes, on identifying those structuring principles that could be treated as characteristics of a given type of society in the sense that they could be derived from cooperation processes taking place in different areas of individuals' life. In the second case, researchers began to be occupied with actions themselves, since their repetitiveness was supposed to be the mechanism responsible for reproducing structures underlying social order conceived in an abstract way.

This becomes apparent upon a comparison of theoretical programs formulated for sociology by Durkheim and Parsons. For the former, the axiomatic statement was that "[i]f there is to be *true sociology*, there must be certain phenomena produced in each society which are specifically *caused by that society*, which would not exist in the absence of that society and which are what they are because society is as it is" (1981, 1061; emphasis preserved). On the other hand, in a theoretical system developed half-century later in order to provide a

9 It is worthwhile to draw attention to the fact that this period had a completely different character in USA and Europe. The American society was born out of chaotic individual actions rather than by struggling with structures of the former social order. In this sense, it offered a completely different cognitive context when considered from the perspective of sociologists who described it.

10 As Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl indicate in their discussion of Parsons's debate with the utilitarianists, "he is of the opinion that social order is an unquestionable fact, that there *is* order and that order is *not* a truly mysterious phenomenon. [...] *Parsons asked which qualities of human agents might render social order possible*" (2009, 30–31; emphasis preserved).

basis for the practice of modern sociology, Talcott Parsons considered it equally obvious that these concepts need to refer to characteristics of individual actors; consequently, they need to be positioned in a broader frame of a general *theory of action*.

The findings of Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action*, first published in 1937, defined a lasting common ground for sociological discussions, providing a frame of reference for a specific consensus in research. Despite the fact that some of the book's specific claims have been subjected to criticism – and that the “normative” paradigm it set up faced competition from the “interpretive” one¹¹ – in neither case was it really questioned whether Parsons was right in assuming that individual actions ought to be the point of departure for sociological considerations. The process of socializing and coordinating actions, leading to the formation of a higher-order entity, was explained in this framework not by indicating certain superior rules that would historically constitute a given society, but by analysing mechanisms that reference universalist assumptions lying at the foundation of a given theory of action.¹²

The individualization of modern sociology was certainly facilitated – especially in its early moments after the Second World War – by the development of quantitative research, which is till now considered by many scholars as the one and only scientific method of analyzing social phenomena.¹³ One could argue that post-war sociology was primarily an empirical discipline: the theoretical concepts it developed only slightly impacted research conducted in its

11 Cf. Wilson 1970.

12 Within the normative paradigm this mechanism was equated with the acquiring of social norms by individuals in the period of socialization, while in the interpretive one – with negotiating meanings in processes of interaction.

13 Naturally, it is also possible to enumerate (as is often done) other reasons for the process of individualizing social sciences. From a theoretical perspective, it was reinforced by the prevalence of neo-positivist philosophy in social sciences, favoring empiricism, as well as by the development of measuring and indexing theories. Moreover, pragmatism had a strong impact on the development of sociology in the USA. From a practical perspective, there was increasing demand for useful information regarding the opinions, needs and motivations of individuals, especially in industry (marketing research) and politics (election polls). Finally, from the perspective of ideology, the dominance of democratic regimes in Western countries (ones where sociology could develop after WWII) elevated the question of individual rights and equality in the face of law to the rank of a fundamental rule. None of these factors are accounted for here because the point of the present discussion is rather to underline differences in theoretical approaches developed by classical and modern sociology.

framework, while the hidden patterns of social phenomena would be inferred from correlations and other statistical relations. What has become the fundamental *datum* of sociology is not even individuals' behavior but rather their opinions, which came to serve as the basis – more or less justified in theoretical terms – for drawing conclusions about the potential direction of social actions.¹⁴ In this way, individuals themselves became removed from their social environment because their “representative character” turned out to have merely a statistical meaning, one not reflecting the affiliation of study subjects to any broader community.

The rapid development of quantitative research that utilizes methods of statistical analysis imposed on sociologists a mode of thinking rooted in the categories of cause and effect.¹⁵ This stands in contrast to the approach of classical sociologists, who would conduct their analyzes employing the category of social processes. As Andrew Abbott argues (1992), the introduction of the new methodology involved making certain tacit assumptions, which can be traced in today's prevailing theoretical modes. Among these assumptions three play a particularly important role: the spatial and temporal independence of studied individuals; the nature of causality (treating specific explanatory variables as separate causes, disregarding their interactions); and finally, the consent to disregard the temporal order of changes occurring within particular explanatory variables (433–434). These assumptions not only reinforced the tendency to treat social phenomena as the total sum of individual actions but also basically precluded reflection on the relationship between the micro level (i.e. one of individual actions analyzed in terms of behavioral scripts, habits, lifestyles, values, interests etc.) and the macro level (i.e. one of social structures analyzed in terms of social rules, cultural patterns, institutions etc.). After all, as Abbott notes, the problem of this relationship is in itself a problem of time because it encompasses events

14 One classic example is the field of attitude research, the kind of work with which modern sociology is most often associated, and which boils down in practice to examining opinions of uncertain consistency and slight reference to both real actions (cf. Wicker 1969) and the theory of attitudes developed in social psychology (cf. Wojciszke 2002).

15 Although most methods of statistical analysis allow merely to ascertain the existence of an interdependence, the passage from the empirical finding that “level of education is correlated with income” to the conclusion that “higher education guarantees better income” is in many cases drawn almost automatically, if not by researchers then by the wider public.

that occur in different tempos, might overlap, and have different implications for the course of the process they are a part of.

Undoubtedly, one of the consequences of such sociological practice was its division into two, unrelated currents already at an early stage of the discipline's formation after the Second World War.¹⁶ One current was focused on analyzing more general social structures, and assumed a chiefly theoretical and "speculative" character (as in theories of organization, social structure, culture etc.). The other current, more firmly grounded in empirical research, was concentrated on analyzing individual convictions, values and attitudes, seeing them as the main variables explaining individual actions.¹⁷ This division was accompanied by the increasing partitioning of sociology's field into specific areas of social life examined by different kinds of "sociologies": sociology of family, of religion, of culture, of politics etc. They evolved in separation, developing unrelated explanatory concepts and distinct modes of organizing professional life, but rarely communicating with each other. Such specialization occurred at the cost of a more general reflection on society – the concept that transformed from one having many theoretical dimensions into a descriptive self-evident category.

Thus, a distanced perspective on the changes in post-war sociology reveals one peculiarity: at the basis of its development there was a secondary *de-theorization* of the discipline's fundamental concept – that of society. It did not matter much until the entity behind this term retained the basic characteristics of a particular form whose emergence gave rise to classical sociology and constituted the empirical basis for the later developed methods of studying social phenomena. However, along with the intensification of changes in contemporary society it became apparent how risky it may be to allow for the widening of the gap between implicit assumptions regarding the nature of the society, conceived in abstract terms, and processes or phenomena occurring within one of its historical form.

Naturally, the de-theorization of the concept of society did not uproot theory from sociology. Instead, it gave theorizing a specific character. On the one hand, the "obvious" character of the very concept of society bred a temptation to treat processes occurring in it comprehensively, which found expression in attempts

16 They have their counterparts in two fundamental works by Parsons, who developed not only the above-mentioned theory of social action, but also one of social system (1951).

17 It is worthwhile to recall here that the concept of attitude was introduced by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) to denote individual counterparts of *social* values. It was only with the development of empirical sociological research that these two concepts began to be treated as describing differentiation of *individual* beliefs, needs and feelings.

to develop a “general social theory,” or “Grand Theory,” as C. Wright Mills called it in 1959 (2000). These attempts usually took the shape of elaborate conceptual formulas that would derive the existence of social structures from the most fundamental idea of social action.¹⁸ On the other hand, the highly abstract character of such formulas, as well as their diminished usefulness in explaining particular social phenomena, enforced in some ways the parallel development of so-called mid-range theories, constructed usually around single concepts, rather freely derived from the tradition of social thought or constructed ad hoc to satisfy the needs of a specific theory.

The liberation of theory from broader reflection on the nature of society left, at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, deep cracks in the understanding of the character and goal of social sciences, which had been shaped by Parsons’ works. Giddens argues that “the loss of the center ground formerly occupied by the orthodox consensus has seemingly left social theory in a hopeless disarray,” pointing out it has been torn apart by “the babble of rival theoretical voices” (1986, xvi). As he emphasizes, most “novel” theoretical approaches developed at the time had rather old roots and were merely revisiting those ideas or views that had been abandoned earlier or functioned at the margin of sociological mainstream.¹⁹

Drawing from the tradition of social thought could hardly be objected. However, one may raise reservations concerning the way in which the canon was utilized because a significant portion of the “novel” approaches – despite being invigorating and refreshing in comparison with traditional directions taken in sociology – turned out, with the passage of time, to be as useless in analyzing the rapidly accelerating processes of social change as the “old” approaches.²⁰ Thus, the emergence of new positions only reinforced the sense of inconsistency marring sociological explanations and thereby deepened the feeling of “cognitive

18 A classic example of this is of course the theory developed by Parsons, while its contemporary counterpart would be that of Giddens (1986).

19 Giddens points out, firstly, the emergence of voices neglected by Parsons, which foregrounded the phenomena that some of his critics “saw primary in Marx – class division, conflict and power” (xiv), and secondly – the fact that the American “market” saw the rise of new theoretical schools born in Europe, such as phenomenology and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (xv).

20 This also concerns Giddens’s own theory of structuration. Although his work has been widely recognized and enjoys respect due to its comprehensive scope and elaborate theoretical apparatus, it seems that it has not really impacted actual research practice.

confusion” (Mizstal 2000) which sociologists have experienced on a daily basis in the face of an increasing number of new social phenomena.

Of course, this does not mean that sociology ignored the emergence of those new phenomena. However, their treatment was strongly conditioned by the “division of labor” developed earlier. Thus, transformations of society were registered on the empirical level either as changes of more general social structures (“subsystems,” to employ Parsons’ terminology), or as sequences of changes in individual traits such as aspirations, values or attitudes.

The clearest example of an approach that follows the first model is the concept of “post-industrial society” popularized by Daniel Bell (1973). In the 1970s and 1980s, many researchers employed this idea in their efforts to analyze social transformations. For Bell himself, the key characteristic of post-industrial society was visible in the changes in the USA’s social structure, which were related to the increase in the number of people employed in the services sector. These changes were the outcome of the passage from technologies based on using various forms of energy to ones rooted in data processing, a move facilitated by “theoretical knowledge.” According to Bell, this process entailed a change in factors regulating the society’s functioning because the “game against fabricated nature” (which determined the basic design of the industrial society) began to change into the “game between people,” who became engaged in creating, gathering and processing information. The basis of the fundamental social conflict also underwent a vital transformation: “If the struggle between capitalist and worker, in the locus of the factory, was the hallmark of industrial society, the clash between the professional and the populace, in the organization and in the community, is the hallmark of conflict in the post-industrial society” (1973, 129).

Introducing the concept of post-industrial society, Bell often emphasized that out of society’s three dimensions that make it possible to describe it – namely social structure, politics and culture – he would limit his analyzes only to structural transformations and their consequences for the realm of politics. He certainly had the right to do so. However, it remains rather unclear why changes in exactly these dimensions would justify speaking about a new *type* of society. While he has already mentioned in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* that the rise of post-industrial society is necessarily correlated with the growing disjunction between the spheres of economy and culture (1973),²¹ later focusing on this disjunction directly in the *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), where

21 Cf. especially the chapters “The Dimensions of Post-Industrial Society” and “Coda: An Agenda for the Future.”

he underscores the role played in its creation by modernity, which was “driven by the self-infiniting spirit of the radical self” (xxix), it remains unknown what would link changes occurring at the level of macro structures with changes in culture.

The lack of connection between macro and micro levels – i.e. between more general social structures and individual behavior – was also acutely felt in research focused on registering changes in attitudes, values and views of individuals.²² It is quite telling that concepts synthesizing such changes, e.g. consumerism, reflexivity or individualism, were used in turn to explain transformations of entire societies. This is best illustrated by the career of the concept of individualization. It has been understood, on the one hand, as a process involving individual striving for self-fulfillment and development of one’s potential, and on the other – as the sum of transformations occurring in basic areas of social life in contemporary society, a perspective popularized by Beck (1992).

The concept of “individualized society” – a contradiction in itself – invites a series of questions, casting doubt on both currently dominant research practices and their solutions to specific social problems. Beck himself draws attention to this by asking: “Is it possible, at all, for a society in the drifting sand of individualization to be registered statistically and analyzed sociologically? Is there any remaining basic unit of the social, whether the household, the family, or the commune? How could such units be defined and made operational? How should the various political spheres – for example local politics, traffic policy, environmental policy, family policy, welfare policy – react to the diversification and transitoriness of needs and situations? How must social work (and its educational content) change when poverty is divided up and, as it were, distributed laterally among biographies?”²³ What architecture, what spatial planning, what

22 This kind of perspective forced the explanation of attitudes, values and convictions mainly in psycho-social or cultural terms. As a result, culture (defined as a system of values) has also basically changed its character: it was no longer a systemic concept, but rather one that describes attributes of individuals. It is therefore a small wonder that perhaps the only sociological theory attempting to account for contemporary changes is now the one formulated by Ronald Inglehart (1990) – the theory of transition from material to post-material values.

23 Beck refers here to the change he widely commented on (cf. Beck 1992), which consists in the passage from the “vertical” distribution of poverty in the society (affluent upper and middle classes, and poor lower classes) to the situation in which most individuals have their chance, or are rather exposed to the risk of becoming impoverished at some point in their life.

educational planning does a society need under the pressure of individualization? Has the end come for the big parties and the big associations, or are they just starting a new stage of their history?" The primary question, however, is this: "[I]s it still at all possible to integrate highly individualized society?" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1996, 42–43).

Today's sociology leaves most of these and similar questions unanswered, focusing in its analyzes of ongoing changes on documenting various peculiarities characteristic of contemporary social life. One could even say that although in recent years most sociologists' basic preoccupation was with finding new qualities that would grant original status to contemporary patterns of social actions, these qualities are in fact usually described in isolation from systemic features of society as such or treated as a continuation or a distillate of attributes characterizing modern society. Furthermore, analyzes of social structures – even though some of their findings may have suggested that we might deal with a change of society's fundamental form – have not yet offered any theoretical synthesis or even provided ground for agreement among the various positions, which could serve as the basis for a new consensus.²⁴ Although the conviction that "the kind of society analyzed by Marx, Weber and Durkheim, the kind of society inhabited by most westerners for the past century and a half, is no more" (Kumar 1995, 2–3) is rather widespread, it has almost no influence on either the conceptual apparatus of contemporary sociology or its research-related practices. Maybe, because it is highly vague what other type of society displaced the one examined by classical sociologists.

Contemporary sociology steers clear of the problem posed by the Great Change, i.e. the systemic transformation that is now altering the basic qualities of society as a historically given form of organizing human activities. Even those like Giddens or Beck – who have adopted a more comprehensive approach in their accounts of ongoing changes – prefer to speak of "late modernity" or "second modernity," avoiding direct answers to questions about the extent to which those "late" or "second" versions of the modern society actually differ

24 One attempt at offering such a synthesis was made by Manuel Castells in the trilogy *The Information Age* (2001a, 2002, 2001b). However, the factual density of his analyzes as well as his avoidance of "excessive theorization" make any simple reconstruction of the author's conceptual apparatus problematic (cf. Stalder 2008). His only concept that became widespread is the idea of "network society" (although he popularized it, it is most often used in ways that contradict his theory), whereas the notion of "informationalism," which is crucial in Castells's theoretical system, has not attracted broader attention among researchers.

from the “early” or “original” rules that organized the modern type of social order. As Zygmunt Bauman emphatically puts it, “postmodern sociology is distinguished by avoiding confrontation with postmodernity as a certain form of social reality, as a new departure set apart by new attributes” (2003, 41). It is a “mimetic representation of the postmodern condition” (42) rather than an attempt at describing social reality from outside – an effort which would involve a more or less disciplined search for those characteristics that are specific for the new type of social organization.

Without a doubt, one of the basic reasons for this state of affairs is the fact that contemporary sociology does not have any concept of society as an entity that assumes *various forms*. Despite the collapse of the “orthodox consensus” grounded in works by Parsons, questions posed in sociology’s mainstream are still rooted in a reified vision of society as a system comprised by basically unchanging structures that would constitute its essence, thus creating a framework for individual actions, although these actions may not necessarily follow the logic of those structures. Given such an approach, what disappears from the view of researchers is the *systemic* character of *historically* shaped types of social order. The consequences of this are twofold. First, theoretical reflection would rather focus on developing conceptual formulas isolated from the historical variability of actually existing social systems.²⁵ Second, empirical research would be in turn subordinated to separate, objectified structures or patterns of individual behavior, analyzed without accounting for their systemic entanglement.

At the same time, however, it is precisely those two features – systemic character and historicity – that underlie the concept of society as a specific, nineteenth-century form of socializing individual actions, which constituted the object of study for classical sociology. Parsons’ transposition of this historically given form of sociality into a timeless entity called “society” occurred in defiance of assumptions made in classical sociology.²⁶ The same happened to the

25 Anthony Giddens (1986) attempts to overcome this limitation by introducing the concept of “space-time continuum,” which performs a vital role in distinguishing specific types of systems (societies). However, this occurs at the cost of blurring the “systemic character” of society. Jerzy Szacki remarks that such a character is “relative through and through” for Giddens, and in the case of contemporary societies is, according to him, overestimated by sociologists who “seem oblivious to the fact that the ‘systemic character’ [of society] is rooted in administrative unification rather than in the ‘infrastructure of social order’” (Szacki 2002, 884).

26 As Durkheim claims, “it is not a matter of considering society at a given moment in time, frozen in an abstraction, but rather of analyzing and explaining its formation. [...] Structure itself is revealed in society’s *becoming* and one can only illuminate it on

analytical distinction, introduced in later scholarly practice, between individual behavior and the structures it creates. The difficulties encountered by contemporary sociology while attempting to grasp processes of social change, to answer the question posed by Beck (“What, if anything, integrates today’s society?”) and to identify the main mechanisms transforming social life today have their roots in the failure to acknowledge the historical and systemic character of society. This is why the crisis of society we experience these days is at the same time a crisis of sociology.

Thus, let us return to the period before contemporary sociology fell into this conceptual trap, and explain what the term “society” actually meant when it was used as a *theoretical concept* and a cornerstone of investigations carried out in classical sociology.

1.3 Society as a theoretical concept

Reflecting on contemporary social changes, Norbert Elias draws attention to the relationship between the meaning of certain abstract concepts and the crucial problems of a given epoch. In his view, the very term “abstract” is misleading because such concepts are not created when a researcher isolates some more general qualities from particular cases. They are rather forged in the process of synthesizing “many common elements that made a new, previously unknown entity accessible to communication, raised it into the light of understanding” (2001, 159), thereby reaching a broader community. The development of concepts would thus be the outcome of a long social process, during which the changing conditions of living produce new experiences that are – for some reason – crucial for a given society, and whose particular components are synthesized by introducing new words or changing the meaning of ones already in use.²⁷

condition of not losing sight of this process of becoming. It is constantly becoming and changing; it is life having crystallized to a degree; and to distinguish it from the life from which it derives or the life that determines it amounts to dissociating inseparable things” (1981, 1060).

27 It is worthwhile to recall, as a side note, that Elias’s position undermines the legitimacy of both inductive and deductive scientific models by ascribing a fundamental role to social praxis, both in the narrow sense, i.e. in reference to the community of scholars, and more widely, i.e. in reference to the concept of society as a whole. According to Elias, it is the amassing of new experiences that gives rise to new concepts (both in scientific discourse and everyday language); these experiences are derivative of actions (regardless whether they are scientific experiments or forms of everyday behavior) and

Looking from this perspective at events preceding the birth of sociology, it could be stated that the new aspect of social existence, giving rise to the term “society” in its contemporary understanding, consisted in the ever more overwhelming experience of mutual bonds tying individuals into wholes that exceed the sum of direct contacts, and of the resulting dependence on the actions of other, usually unknown people. The consequences of this experience have been succinctly summarized by Georg Simmel, who argued that “the recognition that man in his whole nature and all his manifestations is determined by the circumstance of living in interaction with other men, is bound to lead to a *new viewpoint* that must make itself felt in all so-called human studies” (1950, 12; emphasis added).

To realize the extent of the novelty inherent in this new viewpoint it suffices to recall that the intellectual currents preceding sociology were radically individualistic. Both concepts rooted in the Enlightenment and ones developed on their basis in liberalism placed individuals in the center of attention, making them the fundamental object of analysis. “Liberalism’s point of departure was to imagine a sovereign individual naturally endowed with certain rights, which cannot be waived or invalidated through arbitrary political decisions made in the name of a supposed general good” (Szacki 2002, 148). The freedom of individuals, guided in their actions by natural instincts, feelings or selfish interests, was considered to be that which defines the framework for explaining social processes, and simultaneously constitutes the greatest value, therefore obliging to protect it from any political designs.

Individualistic accents in descriptions of society in that period can be also traced in conservative thought developed at the turn of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, which was critical of the Enlightenment and liberal traditions. It constituted a reaction to the social transformations that originated in industrialization and the democratic revolution. “Conservatives considered the fall of the former system as dangerous: if not as the ‘dissolution of the society’ then at least as a hazardous disturbing of its foundations, consisting mainly in severing traditional ties between people. The post-revolutionary society appeared to its adversaries as a formless assembly of selfish individuals, all of whom pursue their own interests without minding their neighbors”²⁸ (Szacki 2002, 142).

cannot be communicated by employing the conceptual apparatus used before. This has also informed the emergence of a host of new concepts in contemporary physics.

28 There is a striking resemblance between this account and contemporary diagnoses of the “crisis” or “individualization” of society. This question is addressed later in this book.

In the context of the two above intellectual positions, the perspective offered by the rising discipline of sociology in fact appears as radically distinct. First, classical sociologists neither defied the emerging social reality, nor treated it as a departure from the “natural order” or the arrival of some “chaotic state.” They rather considered it to be a new form of social order, characterized by properties different from those that defined previous ones. The specific “reconciliation” with the effects of processes leading to change, which are extended over longer periods of time, is clearly discernible in Durkheim, who notes in the introduction to *The Division of Labor in Society* that “[w]e can no longer be under any illusion about the trends in modern industry. It involves increasingly powerful mechanisms, large-scale groupings of power and capital, and consequently an extreme division of labor” (2013, 33; emphasis added). Tönnies puts a basically similar thought in different words when he points to the necessity of adopting an “unbiased and theoretically rigorous manner” in analyzing “[w]hat we experience as the ‘present.’” Furthermore, he bemoans the fact that “even a learned and critical public does not as a rule want to be told the view of an author about how things are, how they came about, and how they will turn out; they would rather hear how he thinks they *should be*” (2001, 9–10; emphasis preserved).

Second, classical sociologists held no illusions concerning free will as the chief characteristic of individuals, which makes it possible to explain their actions. The realities of the end of the nineteenth century did not leave much room for such a misconception since the individual had already become subject to the homogenizing forces of the increasingly powerful state, embedded into nation, class, factory or other collectives assembled on various levels of social life’s organization, which all share one property, i.e. the ability to impose certain limits on individuals, subjecting them to specific regulations. “The individual,” Simmel argues, “is thus doubly oppressed by the standards of society: he may not transcend them either in a more general [i.e. specific to all humankind], or in a more individual direction” (1950, 64). Durkheim, on the other hand, notices in the “Preface to the First Edition” of *The Division of Labor in Society* that although “science presupposes the entire freedom of mind,” it becomes paramount to “rid ourselves of those ways of perceiving and judging that long habit has implanted within us” (2013, 6). In this sense – as has been rightly noted by Zygmunt Bauman – the kind of sociology that focuses on explaining social coercion would become primarily a “science of unfreedom” (2010, 1).

Third, this has also involved a shift of focus from the individual to the collective. It was facilitated not only by an increased awareness of the rising role of collective actors in nineteenth-century society (e.g. the “third estate,” the emerging labor movement, capitalists as a group of shared interests, and even

the mob) but also by the conviction that the society itself is a specific synthesis of “lower-degree” collectives. Consequently, everything that occurs within particular collectives would have repercussions for the functioning of the higher whole. When Durkheim writes about the traditional society, which is assembled by way of mechanical solidarity, he also adds that “so long as society is made up of segments what occurs in one of these has less chance of having repercussions upon the others, the stronger the segmentary organization”; however, as Durkheim continues, referring to the modern society organized in accordance to principles of organic solidarity, “[a]s a result of their [the organs’] mutual dependence, what infects one infects others, and thus any serious change assumes a general interest” (2013, 175).

The above three context-shaped properties of the mode of thinking developed in classical sociology can be also found in twentieth-century sociology. It could be even said that for a long time they have defined the discipline’s scope of interest by emphasizing the specific opposition between the individual and the collective; in this framework individuals would be primarily an object of social influences, while collectives would be the basic components of society. As Zygmunt Bauman put it, “concepts like class, power, domination, authority, socialization, ideology, culture and education organized the sociological map of the human world. What all these and similar concepts had in common was the idea of an external pressure which sets limits to individual will or interferes with the actual (as distinct from intended) action” (1988, 5). This “sociological map of the human world” also imposed a mode of articulating new experiences, which had no counterpart in nineteenth-century society, and which resulted from the increased pace of social changes in the second half of the twentieth century. After all, the discovering of individual agency, a process marking all attempts at departure from the orthodox consensus of post-war sociology, occurred in the sphere of those notions of the society that have been shaped by the fundamental nineteenth-century opposition between individual freedom and “unfreedom.”

We should stress, however, that the new “viewpoint” which would define the specific nature of the sociological approach had a much broader character in classical sociology. This has been most clearly articulated by Georg Simmel, who wrote that “[i]t is only a superficial attachment to linguistic usage (a usage quite adequate for daily practice) which makes us want to reserve the term ‘society’ for *permanent* interactions only. More specifically, the interactions we have in mind when we talk about ‘society’ are crystallized as definable, consistent structures such as the state and the family, the guild and the church, social classes and organizations based on common interests. But in addition to these, there exists an immeasurable number of less conspicuous forms of relationship and kinds of

interaction. Taken singly, they may appear negligible. But since in actuality they are inserted into the comprehensive and, as it were, official social formations, they alone produce society as we know it” (1950, 9; emphasis preserved).

Historians of social thought have accorded Simmel the status of an outsider in classical sociology. They focused on his “formalism” and would only go so far as to stress that his insistence on studying those “less official” forms of interpersonal relations gave rise to micro sociology, which was developed later. Such a reading of Simmel was strongly influenced by Durkheim’s polemic and the tradition of the history of social thought, which evolved towards a “taxonomy of genres,” focused on identifying similarities and differences (established according to obscure criteria) between thinkers. However, it is the “ontological” dimension of Simmel’s work that is of greater importance for us than the “systematic” one, because we aim at establishing what lies at the foundation of society as a theoretical concept that has emerged at a specific moment in the development of social reflection and come to constitute the instrument of articulating vital social experiences.

From this perspective, it becomes crucial that Simmel has drawn attention to the existence of a more – so to speak – “elementary” level of social phenomena than the one analyzed by Durkheim (and by contemporary sociology, which followed in the latter’s footsteps). It would consist of “immediate reactions that occur among men” and create *social ties* between them. Simmel claims that “society, as its life is constantly being realized, always signifies that individuals are *connected* by mutual influence and determination” (1950, 10; emphasis added). These connections may be more or less lasting, but they in fact determine the nature of social life. Society would consequently be “something functional, something individuals do and suffer.” Thus, “true to this fundamental character of it, one should properly speak, not of society [*Gesellschaft*], but sociation [*Vergesellschaftung*]²⁹ (10).

Let us dwell on this point because it may lead, especially when lifted from its context, to the conclusion (often drawn in the past) that “interaction” is a central concept in Simmel’s theory (cf. Szacki 2002, 454). This would be perfectly sound had it not been for the fact that Simmel’s “interactionism” fundamentally

29 The term “sociation” coined by the English translator for Simmel’s concept of *Vergesellschaftung* did not catch on in sociology. It is one of the reason why in this book we use the phrase “socializing processes” for the description of such interactions that generate relatively stable patterns of connections between individuals and in consequence, stabilize the forms of coordination of their actions.

differs from contemporary theories that employ this concept. The difference lies primarily in the fact that for Simmel the insistence on the significance of mutual interactions occurring between individuals does not constitute a goal in itself and does not lead to the conclusion that it is interactions themselves or individual actions composing them that ought to constitute the subject of sociological research. On the contrary, he makes it clear that the rules of human behavior should interest sociology only “insofar as they form *groups and are determined by their group existence because of interaction*” (1950, 11; emphasis added).

In this light, it becomes possible to offer a different interpretation of one passage from Simmel, which is often cited as evidence of his “interactionist inclination”: “Sociation continuously emerges and ceases and emerges again. Even where its eternal flux and pulsation are not sufficiently strong to form organization proper, they link individuals together. [...] the whole gamut of relations that play from one person to another and that may be momentary or permanent, conscious or unconscious, ephemeral or of grave consequences [...], all these incessantly tie men together. Here are the interactions among the atoms of society. They account for all the toughness and elasticity, all the color and consistency of social life, that is so striking and yet so mysterious” (1950, 9–10). There is neither any suggestion here that the study of more lasting forms of these ties ought to be abandoned, nor any objection to the analyzes of those historical forms of “sociation” prevalent in a given period, which were conducted by Durkheim or Tönnies. What we find in this quotation is rather a warning against identifying society with its particular nineteenth-century institutional form, and an emphasis on the processual nature of social life.

For Simmel, “[t]he large systems and super-individual organizations that customarily come to mind when we think of society are nothing but immediate interactions that occur among men constantly, every minute, but that have become *crystallized* as permanent fields, as autonomous phenomena. As they crystallize, they attain their own existence and their own laws, and may even *confront* or *oppose* spontaneous interaction itself” (1950, 10; emphasis added). However, this does not mean that they should last indefinitely. Socially created, they depend on connections between individuals, which alone uphold such systems. That is why they may also change along with major transformations of the underlying connections. Thus, if an identified type of shapes and structures is destroyed, it does not mean that society is dissolved too. As a theoretical concept, it is ultimately nothing more than a historically dominant form of social ties, which exist as long as individuals enter into contact.

We have devoted a lot of space to the reconstruction of Simmel’s thought because from our perspective it offers the kind of *theoretical* account of the nature

of society that is both general and open-ended, facilitating analyzes of society's contemporary transformations and simultaneously allowing to incorporate most findings of classical sociologists and their successors. Let us close this chapter with a list of its basic elements. First, on the most abstract level, society can be regarded as a form of sociality, prevalent in a given historical period, rooted in the processes of *socializing individual actions*. Second, such socializing processes always take place due to mutual interactions between individuals, and result in the formation of *ties* among them on various levels of social reality. Third, the emergence of these ties leads to the creation of social *groups*. Fourth, in the course of individual actions such groups acquire a degree of autonomy, which, in turn, allows them to affect the behavior of individuals by channeling it into more *permanent forms*, which contributes to the reproduction of the dominant form of sociality. Finally, the entire process has a continuous character, which means that under certain conditions mutual interactions between individuals can lead to the emergence of *new types of ties*, thus giving birth to a new form of society.

This theoretical perspective shall inform our further analyzes.