

**INDIVIDUALISM, HOLISM AND THE
CENTRAL DILEMMA OF
SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY**

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INDIVIDUALISM, HOLISM AND THE CENTRAL DILEMMA OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

BY

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Contents

List of Tables	<i>vii</i>
About the Author	<i>ix</i>
List of Reviewers	<i>xi</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xiii</i>
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 What Is Sociological Theory?	3
1.1. A Widely Used Concept	4
1.2. The Structure of Sociological Theory	10
1.3. Paradigmatic Plurality	13
Chapter 2 The Two Lines of Theoretical Thinking in Sociology	19
2.1. Prologue: Metaphors and Their Impact on Pre-sociological and Sociological Thinking	19
2.2. The Nature of Basic Dualism	25
2.3. The Individualist Approach	29
2.3.1. The Science of Social Action	29
2.3.2. Utilitarian Theory	32
2.3.3. Interpretative (Hermeneutic) Sociology	43
2.3.4. The Concept of Conversation Markets	60
2.4. The Holistic Approach	65
2.4.1. The Science of Social Facts	65
2.4.2. Structuralism and Post-structuralism	68
2.4.3. Functionalism	74
2.4.4. Systems Theory	78
2.4.5. Network Analysis	82
2.4.6. The Theory of Social Change	84
2.5. Attempts to Unite the Individualist and Holistic Approaches	86
2.5.1. The Sociology of Figuration	87
2.5.2. AGIL	89
2.5.3. Social Constructivism	96

2.5.4.	The Two-level Conception of Society	100
2.5.5.	Habitus and the Social Field	105
2.5.6.	The Theory of Structuration and Social Realism	110
Chapter 3	Dualism—Duality—Duplex	115
3.1.	The Position of the Classics	116
3.2.	Current Solutions	118
3.2.1.	Seeking “The Third”	119
3.2.2.	Constructivism as an Approach based on the Alternation of Individualistic and Holistic Perspectives	127
3.2.3.	The Theory of Structuration as Another Variant of Alternating Perspectives	132
3.3.	The Question of the Actor	134
3.4.	Action	140
3.5.	Interaction	144
3.6.	Structures	146
3.7.	Micro and Macro	150
3.8.	Actors on the Macro-level	153
3.9.	Resources	155
3.10.	The Dimensions of Structuration	158
Chapter 4	Conclusion	163
	Bibliography	165
	Index	177

List of Tables

Chapter 2

Table 1	Overview of Functional and Structural Components Associated with the Individual Institutions of Society. . .	75
Table 2	The Concept of Four Subsystems.	94
Table 3	Social System.	95

Chapter 3

Table 4	The Combination of the <i>Homo Duplex</i> Concept with a Model based on the AGIL Scheme.	140
Table 5	Levels of Giddens' Structuration Analysis.	159
Table 6	Expanded Chart of the Levels of Structuration.	160

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About the Author

Jiří Šubrt has lectured in Sociology at Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic, since 1990. It was in 2009 that he founded the Department of Historical Sociology at the Faculty of Humanities. Jiří is the author and editor of numerous books, mainly dealing with contemporary sociological theory, particularly with regard to issues of action, structure, social systems and social change, and among his most recent works is *The Perspective of Historical Sociology: The Individual as Homo-Sociologicus through Society and History*, published by Emerald in 2017.

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This book is the result of my long-term involvement in contemporary sociological theory. I have lectured on these topics for more than a quarter of a century at Charles University, Prague, publishing a large number of more or less extensive studies, especially in my mother language. Now I want to address my knowledge, ideas and views to a broader professional public. The bulk of this work (Sections 1 and 2) is of a synoptical, summarizing and comparative character; the follow-up part (Section 3) attempts – on the basis of long-term reflection on the problems and critical analysis of the field – to formulate an outline of my own; an original and – as I hope – innovative conception. In the formation of my views on a given area of sociological thinking, important contributions – in addition to studying the vast amount of theoretical literature – have been made by a dazzling range of number of experts who have allowed me to consult on and discuss questions and ideas with them. These have included, among others, Thomas Luckmann, Hans Joas, Iija Srubar, Dirk Kaesler, Willfried Spohn, Bernhard Giesen, Harald Wenzel, Wolfgang Knöbl, Helmut Staubmann, Christoph Reinprecht, Johann Arnason, Dennis Smith and Patrick Baert. Each of them – at different times and to varying degrees – has greatly shifted my thinking about sociology and helped me find the way to my own thoughts, and I am therefore indebted to all of them. My thanks also belong to those who have assisted me in the processing and editing of individual parts of the text; among these are the executive editor of the *Czech Sociological Review*, Robin Cassling, and especially my long-time friend, proofreader and language advisor, Edward Everett. Without their help, this book would not work as it does.

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Introduction

Individualism and holism, the concepts embedded in the title of this book, represent two key theoretical perspectives that have for many decades steered and shaped sociological thought. For over a century, these two interpretative perspectives have also divided sociological theory into two camps, accompanied by a band of scholars trying to bridge this dualism.

According to American sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander, individualist theories derive their appeal and strength from their underlying assumption that humans make decisions as individual, free, autonomous and rationally and morally consistent beings. A related belief is that they are able to express these qualities in their actions regardless of the situation in society or what economic or moral conditions prevail. The problem with this outlook, Alexander notes, is that it is premised on a notion of voluntarism that ignores or underestimates the forces arising from the structures of society. Nor does it give sufficient consideration to how the real space in which individual will is exercised is determined by surrounding society.

Collectivist (i.e. holistic) theories, unlike individualism, assign primacy to social entities (societies, systems, groups, classes, organisations, etc.). The collectivist perspective is important because it creates the basic precondition through which entities can become the subject of deliberate sociological analysis. However, there is a price for fulfilling this precondition. The emphasis it places on the collective, and on larger entities, logically means that the individual will and free human decision-making tends to be lost from the field of view (Alexander, 1987c, p. 13).

The basic question of this book relates to the dilemma between individualist and holistic approaches in sociological thought, and consideration of it is organised into three parts. The first is devoted to sociological theory as a general problem and aims to lay out the wider context. The second looks at the directions presented to sociological thought by individualist and holistic lines of interpretation, also describing attempts to unite these two perspectives. The book's focal point is the third part, where an effort is made to resolve this issue, involving a critical approach to Berger and Luckmann's constructivist conception, a reconsideration of the concept of social roles, inspiration from Durkheim's idea of *homo duplex*, and a redefining approach to certain familiar theoretical concepts. The author's own outline solution in successive steps faces off with Giddens' theory of structuration, which can be considered one of the most elaborate attempts to date to create a unified explanatory model. Alongside this is

2 *Individualism, Holism & Central Dilemma of Sociological Theory*

the observation that there are certain related issues whose resolution is important not just from the perspective of general sociological theory, but also for the orientation of empirical sociological research. The ideas formulated herein may to some degree be controversial, but it is hoped that they provoke discussion which moves us forward in our endeavours.

Chapter 1

What Is Sociological Theory?

In this book, individualism and holism represent two distinct perspectives typically applied in the process of the formation of theory in the social sciences, specifically in the field of sociology; therefore, it is sensible to make a brief excursion to view the complex way theory is structured in contemporary sociology.

The word theory is nowadays used in both scientific and everyday discourse, and in any given context, people usually have some idea what it means. Theory, especially but not only in lay terms, tends to be set in opposition to practice. As such it is associated with attempts at a rational interpretation of phenomena in a particular field (nature, society, human beings) based on very general, abstract forms of thought – such as concepts, opinions, hypotheses and laws. With the help of these, internally logical systems of understanding are developed that we can call theories in the broader sense of the word. Theory is not a direct, immediate description of really occurring phenomena, but rather an attempt to identify and interpret their basic features in an idealised and abstract way. Since every scientific study is by nature selective (never able to take into account every single aspect connected with a segment of reality), no theory can capture a studied phenomenon in its full complexity, but must in some way be reductive. Moreover, individual specific phenomena have characteristics of varying importance to different scientific fields of enquiry.

Here a preliminary guideline is provided by Austrian sociologist Max Haller's assertion that social-scientific and sociological theory is 'a system of general statements with a systematic link to empirically observable social phenomena' (Haller, 1999, p. 39). As understood by British sociologist Anthony Giddens, social theory¹ functions like a bank from which individual social sciences draw the 'money' that they 'work with' to arrive at 'outcomes' which they can then 'deposit' in order to increase the 'capital of the bank'. Thus there is a constant exchange going on between social theories and empirically oriented sciences: social theory should give direction to empirical research, which in turn should be an inspiration for its further development (Giddens, 1997 (1984), p. 227ff). Alexander (1987b, p. 3) notes that, from the perspective of science, theory is 'crucial'; it is the heart

¹We encounter the term 'social theory' more among contemporary British authors – and Giddens is typical in this respect – than among others, having a broader meaning than the term 'sociological theory' but in various contexts used as a synonym for it. This does not apply in an absolute sense, however, and sociological theory is the preferred term, for example, of Nicos Mouzelis (2006).

4 *Individualism, Holism & Central Dilemma of Sociological Theory*

of science. Theories are always born of the reality of facts, but in practice, in the social sciences, it is theories themselves that structure reality, and determine which facts scientists study and with what methods.

1.1. A Widely Used Concept

The question of what sociological theory is has been posed many times and in various contexts. Some years ago, Thomas Ward analysed almost three dozen definitions of sociological theory and synthesised them to create a new definition of sociological theory as:

a logical, deductive-inductive system of concepts, definitions, and propositions that articulate a relationship between two or more selected aspects of a phenomenon, from which it is possible to deduce testable hypotheses. (Ward, 1974, p. 39)

A somewhat more comprehensive description is offered by Calvin Larson (1973), who notes that the phrase sociological theory can be applied to some or all of the following:

- concepts, conceptual classifications and various conceptual constructs;²
- typologies, typological continua and ideal types;
- the structuring of relationships in the form of conceptual schemas;
- intelligent hunches in the form of hypotheses, assumptions, theorems and postulates;
- propositions, axioms, laws and generalisations; and
- models, logical-deductive schemas and mathematical formulations (Larson, 1973, p. 5).

Ward's narrower and Larson's broader description can both to some extent serve as starting points for further reflection, but do not on their own offer sufficient support to adequately tackle the matter of sociological theory. It is enough to open up a random handful of specialised publications for it to become clear that, in sociology, theory is a concept with many meanings.

This observation was made long ago by Robert K. Merton in his book *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1957 [1968]). Merton came to the conclusion that the term sociological theory is widely used to denote the results of six different types of activities carried out by those who call themselves sociologists. According to Merton, these activities are:

²In the literature, we find that instead of the word concept we come across the expression 'term' or 'scientific term', while a system of terms is referred to as scientific terminology. The terminology of individual scientific fields coincides to varying degrees with ordinary language.

- (1) methodology;
- (2) general sociological orientation;
- (3) analysis of sociological concepts;
- (4) sociological interpretations post-factum;
- (5) empirical generalisations; and
- (6) sociological theory (in the narrow sense of the word) (Merton, 1968, pp. 139–155).

Another list of what constitutes sociological theory comes from one of the representatives of neopositivism, Karl-Dieter Opp. According to Opp (1977), in modern sociology, the word theory applies to several different approaches:

- The term sociological theory is used when propositions are formulated that write or speak about individual sociological theories. Opp believes that in this case it is often better to use the term theoretical sociology, because when someone speaks or writes about sociological theory, it does not necessarily mean that they are ‘doing’ sociological theory, but rather that they are concerned with ‘theoretical sociology’.
- The term theory is used to refer to a system of categories that captures those features of reality considered theoretically relevant; in essence a kind of theoretical description. Opp concludes that this method of constructing theory as a categorical system is characteristic of Talcott Parsons.³

³In this connection, we may recall the debate between the conceptual and propositional conceptions of theory, in which the chief protagonists at the time were Talcott Parsons and George Caspar Homans. Parsons set out from the assumption that the contemporary social sciences, when it comes to theory, have not reached the level achieved by the natural sciences, for example, classical mechanics, but are slowly moving in that direction. He thus considered the main task to be the development of a new conceptual scheme to make this possible in the future. He was convinced that in science progress must be based on the revision and innovation of reference frames to obtain a wider and deeper understanding of the facts studied. The basic objective was not to formulate theory in the hypothetical–deductive sense, but rather to create a new reference frame in sociology as the foundation for further theoretical reflection and for empirical research, a ‘new conceptual apparatus’. Parsons distinguishes this conceptual apparatus on the one hand from ad hoc classifications, which are lacking in systemic unity and random in relation to their objects, and on the other hand from theoretical systems represented, for example, by modern mechanics, which are able (at least in laboratory conditions) to formulate propositions about the logical relationships between the variables they work with.

Critics of Parsons counter that his approach does not enrich sociological knowledge, as it focuses de facto on the creation of a lexicon, on dividing phenomena into compartments, on sticking labels on them, or – voiced with even more criticism – on constructing terminological ‘pigeon holes’, without being able more precisely to establish how the phenomena relate to each other. Contrary to Parsons, Homans advocates a notion of theory as a deductive system made up of hierarchically organised, logically related hypothetical propositions about a certain piece of reality.

6 *Individualism, Holism & Central Dilemma of Sociological Theory*

- The term theory tends to be applied to the contributions of scholars who try to formulate what can be called ‘the laws of historical development’.
- According to Opp, most social scientists use the term theory to formulate empirically untestable propositions and evaluative judgements. This kind of *quasi-theorising* in reality does not meet the formal requirements for science to be conducted.
- For Opp himself, as a neopositivist, the only alternative to theory is the model applied in the natural sciences (Opp, 1977, pp. 797–799).⁴

American sociologist Hans L. Zetterberg (1965) speaks of two different interpretations of the concept of social theory in relation to two different sociological traditions:

- (1) In the tradition of humanistic sociology, two interconnected but nonetheless distinct things are referred to as social theories: (1) classical works and enduring sociological writings that can rightly be called the ‘classics of sociology’; (2) sociological criticism or commentary focusing on these writings, tracing the historical continuity in the accumulation of knowledge which is the result of development and reinterpretation.
- (2) Within the sociological tradition the term social theory is applied to two specific but interlinked things: (1) sociological taxonomies or systems of definitions organised as schemas, employing sociological terminology to define individual concepts and relations; (2) systematically classed statements that take the form of laws, that is, ‘nomological’ statements (statements about relations that take the form of general laws) about society that can be supported by evidence (the certainty of proof) (Zetterberg, 1965, pp. 1–29).

German sociologist Karl Otto Hondrich (1976) associates the following four dimensions of a sociological theory:

- (1) content (a theory is a system of concepts and statements about a particular content, which is social reality);
- (2) the methodological dimension (this represents the general starting point for research);

According to Homans, explanation is a deductive process in which a hypothesis at a lower level in a theoretical system (a hypothesis with a lower degree of generalisability) can only be explained with the help of more general hypotheses (Homans, 1972, p. 9 et seq.). In this conception, the strength of a theory is linked to its ability to derive a large number of empirical statements from a small number of propositions of the highest order. We can look at theory as a game in which the winner is the one able under certain circumstances to clarify the largest number of empirical findings from the smallest number of general laws (Homans, 1969, p. 36).

⁴We should note that the proponents of the scientific model have not yet come up with any significant sociological theory that fulfils these conditions.

- (3) the political dimension (often an instrument for controlling social reality); and⁵
- (4) research orientation (as the stimulus for research on social reality) (Hondrich, 1976, p. 14).

Francis Abraham (1982, p. 1) defines theory as a ‘conceptual scheme designed to explain observed regularities, or relationships between two or more variables’. He follows this rather laconic definition with a list of further specific characteristics:

- A theory is expressed through properly defined concepts, logically interconnected to form propositions.
- A theory is a systemic symbolic construct that sheds light on facts which were previously unclear and murky. Constructing a theory is a creative exercise that requires a qualitative leap beyond the manifest.
- A theory is provisional, open to revision in response to new insights and facts. It is neither necessary nor desirable that a sociological theory be formulated definitively once and for all.
- It is possible to test whether a theory is supported by the sum of known facts and evident truths.
- A theory is a systematised formulation that tries to unite the demands of the humanistic tradition (e.g., speculation, creativity) with the demands of the scientific tradition (e.g., measurability, rigoroussness, inductiveness, predictability) (Abraham, 1982, pp. 7–8).⁶

Abraham also defines eight functions a sociological theory should fulfil. It should:

- (1) orientate science in the direction of its research problems;
- (2) make it possible to predict facts;
- (3) systematise the objects of research and the relations between them into corresponding conceptual schema;
- (4) establish a tie between empirical findings and mainstream sociological perspectives, thereby increasing its informational value;
- (5) be testable via the hypotheses it formulates, and amenable to facts;
- (6) steer research and thereby define and, as it were, narrow down the scope of facts studied;
- (7) provide instruments of research; and
- (8) identify gaps in current knowledge and seek to fill them with intuitive, experiential and amplifying generalisations (Abraham, 1982, pp. 12–13).

⁵We should note that the social sciences and their theories are influenced by contrary forces when scientific work becomes subject to pressure from outside science.

⁶We can see here that Abraham is making an appeal for the two distinct traditions, mentioned in connection with Zetterberg, to be united in theory.

8 *Individualism, Holism & Central Dilemma of Sociological Theory*

A further list of criteria that a sociological theory should meet is provided in *Modern Sociological Theory* by Malcolm Waters (1994). According to Waters, a theory must be:

- abstract, that is, using general concepts abstracted from social life;
- thematised;
- logically consistent;
- explanatory in relation to the form, nature and existence of social phenomena;
- generally applicable to every case of the given phenomenon;
- independent, that is, providing explanations that do not depend on how social actors themselves explain their actions; and
- substantively valid, that is consistent with what is known about social life both by lay actors and sociologists (Waters, 1994, p. 3).

Waters in addition distinguishes three types of sociological theory: ‘formal’, ‘substantive’ and ‘positivist’. Formal theories put forth the general foundations of scientific knowledge to establish a basic scheme of concepts, theoretical judgements or principles to explain social life in its broadest and most general features. Substantive theories – unlike formal theories – seek not to capture social life in its entirety, but rather to offer a thorough explanation of specific types of social process. Positivist theories explain the empirical relations between variables by relating them to certain general, abstract statements and showing how they can be deductively explained on the basis of these statements (Waters, 1994, pp. 3–4).

In *Sociological Theory since 1945*, Jeffrey C. Alexander (Alexander, 1987b) argues it is necessary to distinguish between ‘general’ and ‘special’ theories. Overall he describes theory as generalisations derived from particulars, and abstraction derived from particular cases (Alexander, 1987b, p. 2). He notes that there are many ‘special’ theories in sociology, such as about stratification, socialisation, politics and administration, and these special theories are the concern of specialist disciplines (Alexander, 1987b, p. 3). Alexander writes that in his own work he wants to focus not on these special theories, but on general theory, and he considers it one of the basic functions of a general theory to connect or unite individual special theories. A characteristic feature of a general theory is that it is broad in scope, relating to society as a whole, or to modernity, rather than to individual subgroups; it deals with interactions in general, not specific types of interactions.⁷ Alexander points out that there are special theories about economic classes in society, about the middle- or the working class, but general

⁷Alexander’s definition of ‘general theory’ corresponds to Waters’ idea of ‘formal theory’, and his ‘special theory’ basically corresponds to Waters’ concept of ‘substantive theory’.