

Anthony  
Giddens

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THE CONSTITUTION  
OF SOCIETY

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# The Constitution of Society

Outline of the Theory of Structuration

Anthony Giddens

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# Preface

For some while, and in a number of previous publications, I have been seeking to establish an approach to social science which departs in a substantial fashion from existing traditions of social thought. This volume provides a summation of those previous writings, setting them out in what I hope is a developed and coherent manner. The vague term 'approach' to social science actually conveys very well what I take to be the methodological implications of structuration theory. In social science, for reasons expanded upon in considerable detail in what follows, conceptual schemes that order and inform processes of inquiry into social life are in large part what 'theory' is and what it is for. I do not mean by this, of course, that it is not the aim of social theory to illuminate, interpret and explain substantive features of human conduct. I mean that the task of establishing and validating generalizations — I shall not say 'laws' — is only one among various other priorities or aims of social theory. The task of constructing sets of stably established generalizations, which is (perhaps) the lynchpin of the endeavours of the natural sciences, is not an ambition of much relevance to social science. Or so I propose.

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A.G.  
January 1984

# Abbreviations

- CCHM*    *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, vol.1  
(London: Macmillan/Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981)
- CPST*    *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan/  
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979)
- CSAS*    *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, rev. edn  
(London: Hutchinson/New York: Harper & Row, 1981)
- NRSM*    *New Rules of Sociological Method* (London:  
Hutchinson/New York: Basic Books, 1976)
- PCST*    *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* (London:  
Macmillan/Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982)
- SSPT*    *Studies in Social and Political Theory* (London:  
Hutchinson/New York: Basic Books, 1977)

All by Anthony Giddens.

# Introduction

The backdrop to this book is to be found in a series of significant developments which have taken place in the social sciences over the past decade and a half. These have been concentrated in substantial part in social theory, and bear especially upon that most maligned and most provocative of the social sciences, sociology. Sociology is by its very nature controversial. However, for a considerable period after the Second World War, particularly in the English-speaking world, there was a broad consensus about its nature and tasks and about those of the social sciences as a whole. There was, it could be said, a middle ground shared by otherwise competing perspectives, a terrain on which intellectual battles could be fought out. During that period sociology was an academic growth area, a subject with a burgeoning reputation, even if it remained distinctly unpopular in many circles. It was dominated internationally by American sociology, and in social theory the influence of Talcott Parsons was marked.<sup>1</sup> The prestige enjoyed by Parsons's ideas can be exaggerated retrospectively — many found his taste for abstraction and obscurity unattractive, and he had his fair share of critics and detractors. However, *The Structure of Social Action*, first published in the late 1930s but widely known only in the post-war period, was in more than one way a key work in the formation of modern sociology. In it Parsons established a systematic pedigree for social theory, based upon an interpretation of European thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The work of Durkheim, Max Weber and Pareto loomed large, but Marx played a very slight role indeed. The writings of the 1890–1920 generation had supposedly gone beyond Marx in all important respects, sifting out what was valuable and discarding the dross.

The book also set up an approach to social theory of a very definite type, combining a sophisticated version of functionalism and a naturalistic conception of sociology. Parsons's subsequent writings elaborated these views in considerable detail, emphasizing that although human action has very special and distinctive attributes, social science by and large shares the same logical framework as natural science. Himself writing and working in an American context, Parsons's attempt to pinpoint the origins of his thought in European social theory actually served to reinforce the dominant position of American sociology. For Durkheim, Weber and Pareto were regarded as forerunners of the development of the 'action frame of reference', to be given its full expression by Parsons and his colleagues. Sociology may have its main theoretical origins in Europe, but the further elaboration of the subject was a task that had been largely transferred across the Atlantic. Curiously, this result was achieved at the expense of a concomitant recognition of the importance of indigenous American contributions to social theory; G. H. Mead received short shrift in *The Structure of Social Action*, as Parsons came later to acknowledge. To this day, however, there are textbooks on social theory, or 'sociological theory', emanating from the United States, which begin with the classic European thinkers but then convey the impression that social theory in Europe subsequently came to a stop — any further progress is taken to be a purely American affair.

But even within the confines of the debates deriving directly from Parsons's writings, some of the leading contributors were European. Marxism has long been a much more important influence in European than in American intellectual culture, and some of Parsons's most perceptive critics drew inspiration from Marx as well as from readings of Weber rather different from those which Parsons had made. Dahrendorf, Lockwood, Rex and others of a similar standpoint took the theoretical content of Parsons's work much more seriously than did his American radical critics (C. Wright Mills and, later, Gouldner). The former group regarded Parsons's contributions as of major importance but as one-sided in neglecting phenomena they saw as primary in Marx — class division, conflict and power. They were not themselves Marxists, but they envisaged something of a fusion between Parsonian and Marxist concepts. While there were many

important innovations within Marxism during this period — such as the revival of interest in the ‘young Marx’, attempts to merge Marxism and phenomenology, and subsequently Marxism and structuralism — these were not well known to those who called themselves ‘sociologists’, even in Europe. Those who regarded themselves as both sociologists and Marxists tended to share the basic assumptions of functionalism and naturalism, which is one reason why much common ground for debate was found.

The fissures in this common ground opened up remarkably suddenly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and they went very deep. There is no doubt that their origins were as much political as intellectual. But whatever their provenance, they had the effect of largely dissolving whatever consensus had existed before about how social theory should be approached. In its place there appeared a baffling variety of competing theoretical perspectives, none able fully to recapture the pre-eminence formerly enjoyed by the ‘orthodox consensus’. It became apparent to those working in sociology that all along there had in fact been less of a consensus about the nature of social theory than many had imagined. Some traditions of thought, such as symbolic interactionism, had all the while been accorded considerable support without storming the citadel of the orthodox consensus. Other schools of thought that had developed in large part separately from the main body of the social sciences were taken seriously for the first time, including phenomenology and the critical theory of the Frankfurt philosophers. Some traditions which had seemed moribund were given a new impetus. Although Weber had been influenced by the hermeneutic tradition and had incorporated its main concept of *verstehen* into his work, most of those connected with sociology would certainly not have regarded ‘hermeneutics’ as part of their lexicon. But, partly in conjunction with phenomenology, interpretative traditions in social thought again came to the fore. Finally, other styles of thought, such as ordinary language philosophy, were adopted into social theory in various ways.

With these developments the centre of gravity in respect of innovative contributions to social theory moved back towards Europe.<sup>1\*</sup> It became obvious that a great deal of the more

\*References may be found on pp. xxxvi—xxxvii.

interesting theoretical work was going on there — and for the most part in languages other than English. European social theory was, and is, not only alive but kicking very vigorously. But what is the outcome of these stirrings? For the loss of the centre ground formerly occupied by the orthodox consensus has seemingly left social theory in a hopeless disarray. Notwithstanding the babble of rival theoretical voices, it is possible to discern certain common themes in this apparent confusion. One is that most of the schools of thought in question — with notable exceptions, such as structuralism and ‘post-structuralism’ — emphasize the active, reflexive character of human conduct. That is to say, they are unified in their rejection of the tendency of the orthodox consensus to see human behaviour as the result of forces that actors neither control nor comprehend. In addition (and this does include both structuralism and ‘post-structuralism’), they accord a fundamental role to language, and to cognitive faculties in the explication of social life. Language use is embedded in the concrete activities of day-to-day life and is in some sense partly constitutive of those activities. Finally, the declining importance of empiricist philosophies of natural science is recognized to have profound implications for the social sciences also. It is not just the case that social and natural science are further apart than advocates of the orthodox consensus believed. We now see that a philosophy of natural science must take account of just those phenomena in which the new schools of social theory are interested — in particular, language and the interpretation of meaning.

It is with these three core sets of issues, and their mutual connections, that the theory of structuration, as I represent it in this book, is concerned. ‘Structuration’ is an unlovely term at best, although it is less inelegant in the Gallic context from which it came. I have not been able to think of a more engaging word for the views I want to convey. In elaborating the concepts of structuration theory, I do not intend to put forward a potentially new orthodoxy to replace the old one. But structuration theory is sensitive to the shortcomings of the orthodox consensus and to the significance of the convergent developments noted above.

In case there is any doubt about terminology here, let me emphasize that I use the term ‘social theory’ to encompass issues that I hold to be the concern of all the social sciences. These

issues are to do with the nature of human action and the acting self; with how interaction should be conceptualized and its relation to institutions; and with grasping the practical connotations of social analysis. I understand 'sociology', by contrast, to be not a generic discipline to do with the study of human societies as a whole, but that branch of social science which focuses particularly upon the 'advanced' or modern societies. Such a disciplinary characterization implies an intellectual division of labour, nothing more. While there are theorems and concepts which belong distinctively to the industrialized world, there is no way in which something called 'sociological theory' can be clearly distinguished from the more general concepts and concerns of social theory. 'Sociological theory', in other words, can if one likes be regarded as a branch of social theory more generally, but it cannot sustain a wholly separate identity. This book is written with a definite sociological bias, in the sense that I tend to concentrate upon material particularly relevant to modern societies. But as an introduction to structuration theory it is also intended in substantial degree as a formulation of the tasks of social theory in general and is 'theory' in the same sense. That is to say, the focus is upon the understanding of human agency and of social institutions.

'Social theory' is not a term which has any precision, but it is a very useful one for all that. As I represent it, 'social theory' involves the analysis of issues which spill over into philosophy, but it is not primarily a philosophical endeavour. The social sciences are lost if they are not directly related to philosophical problems by those who practise them. To demand that social scientists be alive to philosophical issues is not the same as driving social science into the arms of those who might claim that it is inherently speculative rather than empirical. Social theory has the task of providing conceptions of the nature of human social activity and of the human agent which can be placed in the service of empirical work. The main concern of social theory is the same as that of the social sciences in general: the illumination of concrete processes of social life. To hold that philosophical debates can contribute to this concern is not to suppose that such debates need to be resolved conclusively before worthwhile social research can be initiated. On the contrary, the prosecution of social research can in principle cast light on philosophical

controversies just as much as the reverse. In particular, I think it wrong to slant social theory too unequivocally towards abstract and highly generalized questions of epistemology, as if any significant developments in social science had to await a clear-cut solution to these.

A few remarks are necessary about the 'theory' in social theory. There are certain senses often attributed to 'theory' in the social sciences from which I want to maintain some considerable distance. One conception used to be popular among some of those associated with the orthodox consensus, although it is no longer widely held today. This is the view — influenced by certain versions of the logical empiricist philosophy of natural science — that the only form of 'theory' worthy of the name is that expressible as a set of deductively related laws or generalizations. This sort of notion has turned out to be of quite limited application even within the natural sciences. If it can be sustained at all, it is only in respect of certain areas of natural science. Anyone who would seek to apply it to social science must recognize that (as yet) there is no theory at all; its construction is an aspiration deferred to a remote future, a goal to be striven for rather than an actual part of the current pursuits of the social sciences.

Although this view does have some adherents even now, it is far removed from anything to which I would hold that social theory could or should aspire — for reasons which will emerge clearly enough in the body of the book which follows. But there is a weaker version of it which still commands a very large following and which invites rather longer discussion even in this prefatory context. This is the idea that the 'theory' in social theory must consist essentially of generalizations if it is to have explanatory content. According to such a standpoint, much of what passes for 'social theory' consists of conceptual schemes rather than (as should be the case) 'explanatory propositions' of a generalizing type.

Two problems have to be separated here. One concerns the nature of explanation in the social sciences. I shall take it for granted that explanation is contextual, the clearing up of queries. Now it *might* be held that the only queries worth their salt in social science are those of a very generalized kind, which can therefore be answered only by reference to abstract generalizations. But

such a view has little to commend it, since it does not help to clarify the explanatory import of much of what social scientists (or natural scientists either, for that matter) do. Most 'why?' questions do not need a generalization to answer them, nor do the answers logically imply that there must be some generalizations lurking around which could be invoked to back up the answers. Such observations have become fairly commonplace in the philosophical literature, and I shall not try to extend them further. Much more contentious is a second claim I defend, and elaborate in the book, that the uncovering of generalizations is not the be-all and end-all of social theory. If the proponents of 'theory as explanatory generalization' have too narrowly confined the nature of 'explanation', they have compounded the error by failing to inquire closely enough into what generalization is, and should be, in social science.

Generalizations tend towards two poles, with a range and variety of possible shadings between them. Some hold because actors themselves know them — in some guise — and apply them in the enactment of what they do. The social scientific observer does not in fact have to 'discover' these generalizations, although that observer may give a new discursive form to them. Other generalizations refer to circumstances, or aspects of circumstances, of which agents are ignorant and which effectively 'act' on them, independent of whatever the agents may believe they are up to. Those I shall call 'structural sociologists' tend to be interested only in generalization in this second sense — indeed, this is what is meant when it is claimed that the 'theory' in social theory should comprise explanatory generalizations. But the first is just as fundamental to social science as the second, and each form of generalization is unstable in respect of the other. The circumstances in which generalizations about what 'happens' to agents hold are mutable in respect of what those agents can learn knowledgeably to 'make happen'. From this derives the (logically open) transformative impact which the social sciences can have upon their 'subject matter'. But from it also comes the fact that the discovery of 'laws' — i.e., generalizations of type 2 — is only one concern among others that are equally important to the theoretical content of social science. Chief among these other concerns is the provision of conceptual means for analysing what actors know about why they act as they do, particularly either

where they are not aware (discursively) that they know it, or where actors in other contexts lack such awareness. These tasks are primarily hermeneutic in character, but they are an inherent and necessary part of social theory. The 'theory' involved in 'social theory' does not consist only, or even primarily, of the formulation of generalizations (of type 2). Neither are the concepts developed under the rubric 'social theory' made up only of those which can be fed into such generalizations. Quite to the contrary, these concepts must be related to others referring to the knowledgeability of agents, to which they are inevitably tied.

Most of the controversies stimulated by the so-called 'linguistic turn' in social theory, and by the emergence of post-empiricist philosophies of science, have been strongly epistemological in character. They have been concerned, in other words, with questions of relativism, problems of verification and falsification and so on. Significant as these may be, concentration upon epistemological issues draws attention away from the more 'ontological' concerns of social theory, and it is these upon which structuration theory primarily concentrates. Rather than becoming preoccupied with epistemological disputes and with the question of whether or not anything like 'epistemology' in its time-honoured sense can be formulated at all, those working in social theory, I suggest, should be concerned first and foremost with reworking conceptions of human being and human doing, social reproduction and social transformation. Of prime importance in this respect is a dualism that is deeply entrenched in social theory, a division between objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism was a third -ism characterizing the orthodox consensus, together with naturalism and functionalism. In spite of Parsons's terminology of 'the action frame of reference', there is no doubt that in his theoretical scheme the object (society) predominates over the subject (the knowledgeable human agent). Others whose views could be associated with that consensus were very much less sophisticated in this respect than was Parsons. By attacking objectivism — and structural sociology — those influenced by hermeneutics or by phenomenology were able to lay bare major shortcomings of those views. But they in turn veered sharply towards subjectivism. The conceptual divide between subject and social object yawned as widely as ever.

Structuration theory is based on the premise that this dualism

has to be reconceptualized as a duality — the duality of structure. Although recognizing the significance of the 'linguistic turn', it is not a version of hermeneutics or interpretative sociology. While acknowledging that society is not the creation of individual subjects, it is distant from any conception of structural sociology. The attempt to formulate a coherent account of human agency and of structure demands, however, a very considerable conceptual effort. An exposition of these views is offered in the opening chapter and is further developed throughout the book. It leads on directly to other main themes, especially that of the study of time-space relations. The structural properties of social systems exist only in so far as forms of social conduct are reproduced chronically across time and space. The structuration of institutions can be understood in terms of how it comes about that social activities become 'stretched' across wide spans of time-space. Incorporating time-space in the heart of social theory means thinking again about some of the disciplinary divisions which separate sociology from history and from geography. The concept and analysis of history is particularly problematic. This book, indeed, might be accurately described as an extended reflection upon a celebrated and oft-quoted phrase to be found in Marx. Marx comments that 'Men [let us immediately say human beings] make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.'<sup>\*</sup> Well, so they do. But what a diversity of complex problems of social analysis this apparently innocuous pronouncement turns out to disclose!

\* The phrase is to be found in the introductory paragraphs of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It was made in a polemical vein; those who are ignorant of history, Marx says, may be condemned to repeat it, perhaps even farcically. The exact quotation in the original goes as follows: 'Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen. Die Tradition aller toten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden. Und wenn sie eben damit beschäftigt scheinen, sich und die Dinge umzuwälzen, noch nicht Dagewesenes zu schaffen, gerade in solchen Epochen revolutionärer Krise beschwören sie ängstlich die Geister der Vergangenheit zu ihrem Dienste herauf, entlehnen ihnen Namen, Schlachtparole, Kostüm, um in dieser altehrwürdigen Verkleidung und mit dieser erborgten Sprache die neue Weltgeschichtsszene aufzuführen.' (Marx and Engels: *Werke*, Vol 8. Berlin: Dietz Verlag 1960, p. 115).

In formulating this account of structuration theory I have not been reluctant to draw upon ideas from quite divergent sources. To some this may appear an unacceptable eclecticism, but I have never been able to see the force of this type of objection. There is an undeniable comfort in working within established traditions of thought — the more so, perhaps, given the very diversity of approaches that currently confronts anyone who is outside any single tradition. The comfort of established views can, however, easily be a cover for intellectual sloth. If ideas are important and illuminating, what matters much more than their origin is to be able to sharpen them so as to demonstrate their usefulness, even if within a framework which might be quite different from that which helped to engender them. Thus, for example, I acknowledge the call for a decentring of the subject and regard this as basic to structuration theory. But I do not accept that this implies the evaporation of subjectivity into an empty universe of signs. Rather, social practices, biting into space and time, are considered to be at the root of the constitution of both subject and social object. I admit the central significance of the 'linguistic turn', introduced especially by hermeneutic phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy. At the same time, however, I hold this term to be in some part a misleading one. The most important developments as regards social theory concern not so much a turn towards language as an altered view of the intersection between saying (or signifying) and doing, offering a novel conception of *praxis*. The radical transmutation of hermeneutics and phenomenology initiated by Heidegger, together with the innovations of the later Wittgenstein, are the two main signal markers on the new path. But to pursue this path further means precisely to shake off any temptation to become a full-blown disciple of either of these thinkers.

Let me offer here a short summary of the organization of the book. Having given in the first chapter an outline of the chief concepts involved in structuration theory, in the second I begin the more substantive part of the volume with a discussion of consciousness, the unconscious and the constitution of day-to-day life. Human agents or actors — I use these terms interchangeably — have, as an inherent aspect of what they do, the capacity to understand what they do while they do it. The reflexive capacities of the human actor are characteristically

involved in a continuous manner with the flow of day-to-day conduct in the contexts of social activity. But reflexivity operates only partly on a discursive level. What agents know about what they do, and why they do it — their knowledgeability as agents — is largely carried in practical consciousness. Practical consciousness consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to 'go on' in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression. The significance of practical consciousness is a leading theme of the book, and it has to be distinguished from both consciousness (discursive consciousness) and the unconscious. While accepting the importance of unconscious aspects of cognition and motivation, I do not think we can be content with some of the more conventionally established views of these. I adopt a modified version of ego psychology but endeavour to relate this directly to what, I suggest, is a fundamental concept of structuration theory — that of *routinization*.

The routine (whatever is done habitually) is a basic element of day-to-day social activity. I use the phrase 'day-to-day social activity' in a very literal sense, not in the more complex, and I think more ambiguous, way which has become familiar through phenomenology. The term 'day-to-day' encapsulates exactly the routinized character which social life has as it stretches across time-space. The repetitiveness of activities which are undertaken in like manner day after day is the material grounding of what I call the recursive nature of social life. (By its recursive nature I mean that the structured properties of social activity — via the duality of structure — are constantly recreated out of the very resources which constitute them.) Routinization is vital to the psychological mechanisms whereby a sense of trust or ontological security is sustained in the daily activities of social life. Carried primarily in practical consciousness, routine drives a wedge between the potentially explosive content of the unconscious and the reflexive monitoring of action which agents display. Why did Garfinkel's 'experiments with trust' stimulate such a very strong reaction of anxiety on the part of those involved, seemingly out of all proportion to the trivial nature of the circumstances of their origin? Because, I think, the apparently minor conventions of daily social life are of essential significance in curbing the sources of unconscious tension that would otherwise preoccupy most of

our waking lives.

The situated character of action in time-space, the routinization of activity and the repetitive nature of day-to-day life — these are phenomena which connect discussion of the unconscious with Goffman's analyses of co-presence. In spite of their manifest brilliance, Goffman's writings are usually thought of as perhaps somewhat lightweight in respect of their theoretical content, either because he is regarded above all as a sort of sociological *raconteur* — the equivalent of a sociological gossip whose observations entertain and titillate but are none the less superficial and essentially picayune — or because what he portrays is specific to social life in modern, middle-class society, a cynical society of amoral role players. There is something in each of these views, and to a certain degree Goffman is vulnerable to them because he refrains from drawing out, in a fully systematic way, the implications of his standpoint. Where he does do so he tends to link the rituals of day-to-day social life to ethological accounts of the behaviour of the higher animals and to explicate them in those terms. This may indeed be instructive, but it is not the most useful way of relating his work to problems of social theory because it does not plug the right gaps in what he has to say. One such gap is the absence of an account of motivation, the main reason why his writings are open to the second interpretation mentioned above. I try to show how an analysis of motivation, as developed in relation to routinization and the unconscious, can bring out the systematic character of Goffman's work more fully. Goffman's emphasis on trust and tact strikingly echoes themes found in ego psychology and generates an analytically powerful understanding of the reflexive monitoring of the flux of encounters involved in daily life.

Fundamental to social life is the positioning of the body in social encounters. 'Positioning' here is a rich term. The body is positioned in the immediate circumstances of co-presence in relation to others: Goffman provides an extraordinarily subtle but telling set of observations about face work, about gesture and reflexive control of bodily movement as inherent in the continuity of social life. Positioning is, however, also to be understood in relation to the seriality of encounters across time-space. Every individual is at once positioned in the flow of day-to-day life; in the life-span which is the duration of his or her existence; and in