

SECOND EDITION

with a new introduction

New Rules of Sociological Method

Anthony Giddens

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A Positive Critique of
Interpretative Sociologies

Anthony Giddens

Second Edition

Polity Press

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Preface

This study is only intended as one part of a more embracing project. While it can of course be read as a self-contained work, it touches upon various issues that are not dealt with in a detailed way, but which are vital to my project as a whole. This latter involves three overlapping concerns. One is to develop a critical approach to the development of nineteenth-century social theory, and its subsequent incorporation as the institutionalized and professionalized ‘disciplines’ of ‘sociology’, ‘anthropology’ and ‘political science’ in the course of the twentieth century. Another is to trace out some of the main themes in nineteenth-century social thought which became built into theories of the formation of the advanced societies and subject these to critique. The third is to elaborate upon, and similarly to begin a reconstruction of, problems raised by the – always troubling – character of the social sciences as concerned with, as a ‘subject-matter’, what those ‘sciences’ themselves presuppose: human social activity and intersubjectivity. This book is proposed as a contribution to the last of these three. But any such discussion bursts the bounds of this sort of conceptual container, and has immediate implications for work in the other areas. As a single project, they are tied together as an endeavour to construct a critical analysis of the legacy of the social theory of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for the contemporary period.

viii Preface

This book is about 'method' in the sense in which social philosophers characteristically employ the term – the sense in which Durkheim used it in his *Rules of Sociological Method*. That is to say, it is not a guide to 'how to do practical research', and does not offer any specific research proposals. It is primarily an exercise in clarification of logical issues. I have subtitled the study a 'positive critique' of 'interpretative sociologies'. Anyone who reads on will see that this does not mean 'positivistic'. I use it only to mean 'sympathetic' or 'constructive': the sense that predates Comte's translation of the term into a definite philosophy of social and natural science. 'Interpretative sociologies' is something of a misnomer for the schools of thought that appear in the first chapter, since some of the authors whose work is discussed there are anxious to separate what they have to say from 'sociology'. I use the term only because there is no other readily available one, to group together a series of writings that have certain shared concerns with 'meaningful action'.

The themes of this study are that social theory must incorporate a treatment of action as rationalized conduct ordered reflexively by human agents, and must grasp the significance of language as the practical medium whereby this is made possible. The implications of these notions are profound, and the book is confined to tracing through only some of them. Anyone who recognizes that self-reflection, as mediated linguistically, is integral to the characterization of human social conduct must acknowledge that such holds also for his or her own activities as a social 'analyst', 'researcher', etc. I think it correct to say, moreover, that theories produced in the social sciences are not just 'meaning frames' in their own right, but also constitute moral interventions in the social life whose conditions of existence they seek to clarify.

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Quite a number of years have passed since this book first saw the light of day, but I hope it has not lost its relevance to current problems of social theory. In *New Rules* I deal with a number of forms of interpretative sociology, as well as with certain more central sociological traditions. When I wrote it, I regarded the book – and continue to do so today – as a ‘dialogic critique’ of the forms of social and philosophical thought which it addresses. That is, it is a critical engagement with ideas that I see as of essential importance, but which for one reason or another were not adequately developed in the perspectives from which they originally sprang. Some have seen such a strategy as a misplaced eclecticism, but I consider such dialogic critique as the very life-blood of fruitful conceptual development in social theory.

New Rules of Sociological Method dovetails with other ‘positive critiques’ which I sought to provide in elaborating the basic tenets of structuration theory. In complementary writings that I undertook at about the same period, I addressed approaches to social analysis either left aside, or treated only in a marginal way, in *New Rules*. Such approaches included naturalistic sociology – a term which I now think of as preferable to the more diffuse and ambiguous label, ‘positivism’ – functionalism, structuralism and ‘post-structuralism’. *The Constitution of Society* (1984) established a more comprehensive framework for the notion of

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structuration than was available in *New Rules*, but did not supplant it.¹ *New Rules* makes an independent statement about questions of agency, structure and social transformation; its distinctive concentration is upon the nature of 'action' and the implications of an analysis of action for the logic of social science.

The debates have moved on over the period since *New Rules* was originally published, but in revising the text I have found little of substance that I think it necessary to abandon or reformulate. The work of Talcott Parsons still has its adherents and, as filtered through the writings of Niklas Luhmann and others, remains influential; but it no longer has the central position it once held. Phenomenological notions are not as widely drawn upon now as they were at the time, while post-structuralism, in its different guises, has increased its importance and has become allied to conceptions of post-modernism. I do not feel, however, that these changes make any substantial difference to the standpoint I developed in this study, which retains its validity.

New Rules has attracted its own share of critiques, some positive and others more destructive in impetus. I have responded to such criticism in a variety of places and shall not cover the same ground again here. Let me concentrate upon two issues only: whether or not the idea of the 'duality of structure', vital to structuration theory, merges levels of social life that should be kept apart; and whether the distinction between the 'single hermeneutic' of natural science and the 'double hermeneutic' of the social sciences should be sustained. The literature subsequent to the publication of *New Rules* contains many discussions of these problems. For purposes of simplicity, I shall focus upon those offered by Nicos Mouzelis in respect of the first question, and Hans Harbers and Gerard de Vries in respect of the second.²

Many critics have accepted the objections I made against the concept of structure as ordinarily used in sociology. Seen as 'fixed' and, in Durkheimian fashion, as 'external' to social actors, it appears as a constraint upon action, rather than also as enabling. It is to grasp this double character that I introduced the notion of the duality of structure. What are some of the objections that might be levelled against it? They include the following.

- 1 It may be true that actors routinely draw upon rules and resources, and thereby reproduce them, in the course of their day-to-day activities. Surely, however, such an orientation to rules and resources is not the only, or even the predominant, one they have? For, as Mouzelis puts it, 'Actors often distance themselves from rules and resources, in order to question them, or in order to build theories about them, or – even more importantly – in order to devise strategies for either their maintenance or their transformation.'³
- 2 Hence it follows that the idea of the duality of structure cannot properly account for the constitution or reproduction of social systems. Rules and resources are reproduced not only in the context of their practical use, but also where actors 'distance' themselves from them in order to treat them in a strategic way. When such a circumstance applies, the concept of the duality of structure is quite inappropriate. Instead, perhaps, we should speak of a *dualism*, because the individual, the 'subject', confronts rules and resources as 'objects' in the social environment.
- 3 These comments bear directly upon distinctions between micro- and macro-analysis in the social sciences. Although not discussed directly in *New Rules*, the micro/macro differentiation, as ordinarily understood, is something which I place in question. However, if we try to do without it, the critic asserts, the result is an illegitimate reductionism. Social systems have many structural properties which cannot be understood in terms of the actions of situated individuals. Micro- and macro-analysis are not mutually exclusive; each in fact requires the other, but they have to be kept apart.
- 4 The idea of the duality of structure cannot cope with action oriented to large- rather than small-scale contexts. For instance, it may work well when one considers an everyday conversation between two people in the street, but does not fit a situation where, say, a group of heads of state meet to take decisions affecting millions. The former situation, it might be said, is inconsequential in its implications for larger social orders, while the latter affects such orders in a direct and comprehensive way. In structuration theory there is an 'identification' of agency with 'micro-subjects which, by the

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routine use of rules and resources, contribute to the reproduction of the institutional order. Macro action is neglected – both the type of action that results from the incumbency of authority positions . . . as well as that which results from the variable ability of individual subjects to group together in order to defend, maintain, or transform rules and resources.’⁴

- 5 The Durkheimian notions of externality and constraint need to be sustained, albeit perhaps not in the form in which Durkheim himself expressed them. There are degrees or levels involved; what is external and constraining for one individual may be much less so for another. This point connects with the previous ones, for it means recognizing that social life is hierarchical – rather than speaking of ‘the individual’ confronting ‘society’, we should acknowledge a multiplicity of levels of social organization, with varying degrees of disjunction between them.

In responding to such observations, let me first of all expand upon why I developed the concept of duality of structure. I did so in order to contest two main types of dualism. One is that found among pre-existing theoretical perspectives. Interpretative sociologies, such as those discussed in *New Rules*, as I have put it elsewhere, are ‘strong on action, but weak on structure’. They see human beings as purposive agents, who are aware of themselves as such and have reasons for what they do; but they have little means of coping with issues which quite rightly bulk large in functionalist and structural approaches – problems of constraint, power and large-scale social organization. This second group of approaches, on the other hand, while ‘strong on structure’, has been ‘weak on action’. Agents are treated as if they were inert and inept – the playthings of forces larger than themselves.

In breaking away from such a dualism of theoretical perspectives, the analysis developed in *New Rules* also rejects the dualism of ‘the individual’ and ‘society’. Neither forms a proper starting-point for theoretical reflection; instead the focus is upon *reproduced practices*. It is important, however, to be clear about what discarding the dualism of ‘the individual’/‘society’ means. It emphatically does not mean denying that there are social

systems and forms of collectivity which have their own distinct structural properties. Nor does it imply that those properties are somehow 'contained' in the actions of each situated individual. To challenge the dualism of the individual and society is to insist that each should be *deconstructed*.

Since 'the individual' has corporeal existence, the concept might seem unproblematic. Yet an individual is not a body and even the notion of the body, in relation to the acting self, turns out to be complex. To speak of an individual is to speak not just of a 'subject', but also of an agent; the idea of action (as Talcott Parsons always stressed) is thus inevitably a central one. Moreover – and this is crucial – action is not simply a quality of the individual but is, equally, the stuff of social organization or collective life as well. Most sociologists, including even many working within frameworks of interpretative sociology, have failed to recognize that social theory, no matter how 'macro' its concerns, demands a sophisticated understanding of agency and the agent just as much as it does an account of the complexities of society. It is precisely such an understanding that *New Rules* seeks to develop.

The concept of the duality of structure is bound up with the logic of social analysis; it does not, in and of itself, offer any generalizations about the conditions of social reproduction/transformation. This point is fundamental, because otherwise a structurationist view would indeed be open to the charge of reductionism. To say that the production and reproduction of social life are one and the same thing takes *no* position at all about the conditions of stability or change in concrete conditions of social activity. Rather, it is to say that neither on the level of logic, nor in our practical day-to-day lives, can we step outside the flow of action, whether such action contributes to the most rigid of social institutions or to the most radical forms of social change.

These things having been said, I can comment upon points 1–5 in sequence. Point 1 both misunderstands the notion of duality of structure and presumes too primitive a concept of reflexivity. All actors are social theorists, and must be so to be social agents at all. The conventions which are drawn upon in the organization of social life are never 'blind habits'. One of the distinctive

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contributions of phenomenology, and particularly of ethnomethodology, has been to show that (1) the conduct of social life continually involves 'theorizing' and (2) even the most enduring of habits, or the most unshakeable of social norms, involves continual and detailed reflexive attention. Routinization is of elemental importance in social life; but all routines, all the time, are contingent and potentially fragile accomplishments.

Individuals in all forms of society 'distance themselves' from rules and resources, approach them strategically and so forth. In some respects, for reasons just noted, this is the condition of even the most regularized modes of social reproduction. No matter how traditional a context of action, for example, tradition is chronically interpreted, reinterpreted, generalized about, as the very means whereby it is 'done'. Of course, all moments of reflexive attention themselves draw upon, and reconstitute, rules and resources; to repeat, there can be no stepping outside of the flow of action.

The sort of 'distancing' Mouzelis has in mind, however, is particularly evident in social circumstances where the hold of tradition has become attenuated. A useful distinction can be drawn here between reflexivity, as a quality of human action as a whole, and *institutional reflexivity*, as an historical phenomenon. Institutional reflexivity refers to the institutionalization of an investigative and calculative attitude towards generalized conditions of system reproduction; it both stimulates and reflects a decline in traditional ways of doing things. It is also associated with the generation of power (understood as transformative capacity). The expansion of institutional reflexivity stands behind the proliferation of organizations in circumstances of modernity, including organizations of global scope.⁵

So far as point 2 goes, I should reaffirm that the duality of structure 'accounts for' nothing. It has explanatory value only when we consider real historical situations of some sort. The 'duality' of the duality of structure concerns the dependence of action and structure, taken as a logical assertion, but it certainly does not involve a merging of the situated actor with the collectivity. Much better here, indeed, to speak of a hierarchy rather than the sustaining of a dualism: there are many modes of interconnection between individuals and collectivities. It is

perfectly obvious that every situated actor faces an environment of action which has an 'objectivity' for him or her in a quasi-Durkheimian sense.

As for points 3 and 4, the distinction between micro- and macro-analysis is not a very useful one in social science, at least in some of the ways in which it is ordinarily understood. It is especially misleading if seen itself as a dualism – where 'micro-situations' are those to which a notion of agency is appropriate, whereas 'macro-situations' are those over which individuals have no control.⁶ What is important is to consider the ties, as well as the disjunctions, between situations of co-presence and 'mediated connections' between individuals and collectivities of various types. It is just not the case that what Mouzelis calls 'macro action' is left aside in structuration theory. 'Macro action', however, for the reasons he gives, is not the same as lack of co-presence: here the phenomenon of differential power is usually central. A small number of individuals meeting together may enact policies that have very extensive consequences. Macro-action of this sort is even more pervasive than Mouzelis implies, because it is by no means limited to conscious processes of decision-making; large-scale systems of power are reproduced just as strongly in more routinized circumstances of co-present interaction.

As for point 5, social life, particularly in conditions of modernity, does involve multiple levels of collective activity. Far from being inconsistent with the views set out in *New Rules*, such an observation is entirely in line with them. 'Externality' and 'constraint' cannot be seen, as Durkheim thought, as general characteristics of 'social facts'. 'Constraint' takes several forms, some of which again concern the phenomenon of differential power. The 'externality' of social facts does not define them *as* social facts, but instead directs attention to various different properties/contexts/levels of the environments of action of situated individuals.

In structuration theory, the concept of 'structure' presumes that of 'system': it is only social systems or collectivities which have structural properties. Structure derives above all from regularized practices and is hence closely tied to institutionalization; structure gives *form* to totalizing influences in social life.

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Is it then in the end misleading to try to illuminate the conception of the duality of structure by reference to language use? It is misleading, I think, if we see language as a closed and homogeneous entity. Rather, we should conceive of language as a fragmented and diverse array of practices, contexts and modes of collective organization. As I stress in the text, the idea of Lévi-Strauss, that 'society is like a language', should be resisted strongly; but the study of language certainly helps cast light upon some basic characteristics of social activity as a whole.

All this having been said, the critic may still feel worried or dissatisfied. For is there not a long distance between 'everyday practices', the situated interaction of individuals, and the properties of the large-scale, even global, social systems that influence so much of modern social life? How could the former in any way be the medium of the reproduction of the structural properties of the latter? One response to this question would be to say that, as a result of current globalizing trends, there actually *are* very important respects in which everyday activities connect to global outcomes and vice versa. In the global economy, for example, local purchasing decisions affect, and serve to constitute, economic orders which in turn act back upon subsequent decisions. The type of food a person eats is globally consequential in respect of global ecology. On a somewhat less encompassing level, the way in which a man looks at a woman may be a constituting element of deeply engrained structures of gender power. The reproduction/transformation of globalizing systems is implicated in a whole variety of day-to-day decisions and acts.

Deconstructing 'society', however, means recognizing the basic significance of diversity, context and history. Processes of empirical social reproduction intersect with one another in many different ways in relation to their time-space 'stretch', to the generation and distribution of power, and to institutional reflexivity. The proper locus for the study of social reproduction is in the immediate process of the constituting of interaction, for all social life is an active accomplishment; and every moment of social life bears the imprint of the totality. 'The totality', however, is not an inclusive, bounded 'society', but a composite of diverse totalizing orders and impulses.

Institutional reflexivity – this notion connects the analysis of

modernity with the more generalized idea of the double hermeneutic. The 'double' of the 'double hermeneutic' again implies a duality: the 'findings' of social science do not remain insulated from the 'subject-matter' to which they refer, but consistently re-enter and reshape it. It is of the first importance to emphasize that what is at issue here is not the existence of feed-back mechanisms. On the contrary, the intrusion of concepts and knowledge-claims back into the universe of events they were coined to describe produces an essential erraticism. The double hermeneutic is thus intrinsically involved in the dislocated, fragmenting nature of modernity as such, particularly in the phase of 'high modernity'.⁷

Many implications flow from this observation, but I shall consider the thesis of the double hermeneutic here only from the point of view of recent debates in the philosophy and sociology of science. Such debates have their origins in the by-now accepted observation that natural science has hermeneutic traits. As discussed in *New Rules*, the old differentiation between *Verstehen* and *Erklären* has become problematic; the idea that natural science deals only, or even primarily, in law-like generalization belongs to a view of scientific activity which has now largely become abandoned. As Karen Knorr-Cetina puts it, 'Natural science investigation is grounded in the same kind of situational logic and marked by the same kind of indexical reasoning which we used to associate with the symbolic and interactional character of the social world.'⁸

Such conclusions have been reached as a result of sociological studies of science rather than philosophical interpretation. Thus experimentation, long considered the bedrock of scientific knowledge, has been studied as a process of the translation and construction of contextual information. But is this a 'single hermeneutic' which can be differentiated from the double hermeneutic of natural science? Some, including Knorr-Cetina, claim not. This distinction, she says, depends upon two assumptions: that human beings possess 'causal agency' not found in nature; and that, in the social world, there is a distinctive means, conscious appropriation, whereby causal agency is triggered. Neither is justified. The first rests upon too unsophisticated a notion of natural causality, for objects in the natural world may

also be said to possess causal powers. The second ignores the fact that there are equivalent, if not directly parallel, triggering mechanisms for the reception of information in the world of nature.

Harbers and de Vries suggest that these conflicting views of the double hermeneutic can be looked at in the light of empirical evidence. Knorr-Cetina bases her thesis upon historical and sociological studies of natural science. Why not consider in a direct way the influence of social science within broader frameworks of knowledge and action? According to them, the thesis of the double hermeneutic presumes two hypotheses: that where the common-sense interpretations constituting social phenomena become the subject of historical change, interpretations offered within the social sciences will change correspondingly; and that novel concepts or findings developed within social science will have to be defended not only within the sociological community but in relation to a 'common-sense forum of lay individuals'. The notion of the double hermeneutic implies that, in contrast to the situation in natural science, sociologists have a 'scientific', rather than only civic, obligation to present their ideas to a lay audience.⁹ Harbers and de Vries examine these hypotheses by looking at developments in education in The Netherlands.

Sociologists have long been involved in documenting unequal educational opportunities. Many projects were established in different countries from the 1950s onwards in order to uncover the factors influencing such inequalities. The Dutch Project on Talents was one of these, the work of a group of eleven social investigators. The idea of the research was to study the large reserve of 'unused talents' believed to exist. In other words, it was thought that many children from poorer backgrounds were qualified for advanced levels of secondary education, but were not to be found in the appropriate schools. The results did not conform to this expectation. Children attended schools which matched their abilities; the relative under-representation of children from underprivileged backgrounds was not because of misdirected decisions about type of school after primary education. The children had already lagged behind in primary school.

These conclusions were at first accepted by most educational