

Symbolic Interactionism in Social Theory – Assessed in the Light of the Elementary Basic Concepts of Sociology

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Samevatting

Waar die 19de eeu grootliks in die greep van meganistiese, fisikalistiese en organisistiese denkstrominge was, word die denke van die 20ste eeu globaal omspan deur die horison van die taal. In hierdie artikel word allereers 'n agtergrondskets gegee van die wyse waarop prominente sosiologiese denkrigtings hulself eensydig georiënteer het aan enkele funderende struktuurmomente van die sosiale aspek. Na die bydraes van grondleggers soos Tönnies, Simmel, Durkheim, Oppenheimer, Von Wiese en Weber, was dit veral Parsons wat met sy struktureel-funksionele benadering die toneel gedurende die middeltydperk oorheers het. Die neo-Marxisme het tydens die studente-opstande van die laat-sestigerjare sigbare prominensie verwerf, hoewel die sisteem-teorie opnuut herleef het in die denke van Alexander en Münch. Tans is Alexander, Habermas en Giddens bepaald drie van die leidinggewende figure op die sosiologiese toneel. Benewens die teenstelling tussen atomisme en holisme word vervolgens oorsigtelik aandag geskenk aan sosiologiese strominge wat eensydige klem gelê het op een of enkele struktuurelemente van die sosiale aspek. Op die basis van hierdie agtergrondskets word die inset van die verskillende nuanses binne die ontstaansgeskiedenis van die simboliese interaksionisme in samehang met die teken-analogie binne die struktuur van die sosiale aspek behandel. Die artikel word afgesluit met die opmerking dat eensydighede weliswaar allereers iets in die werklikheid raakgesien het wat nie misken kan word nie, maar dat die skeeftrekking van die sin daarvan slegs vermy kan word deur van 'n nie-reduksionistiese ontologie uit te gaan.

1. Background perspective

Sociology as a distinct scholarly discipline is not very old, although reflection on human society played a dominant role since ancient Greece.

During the 19th century sociological theory experienced the influence of various *naturalistic* orientations. Comte is known for his (holistic) *organicism* which was continued by Spencer in his (atomistic) *organicism*. Some thinkers explored naturalism in the direction of a physicalist approach. The sociologist L.F. Ward remarks (1906: 331 - 332) that in all his earlier sociological works he consistently defended the conviction that sociology is a true *science*, that is to say that it engages in studying *natural forces* where all phenomena obey the laws of motion of Newton's physics. Consistent with a mechanistic approach he gives preference to the expression: *social mechanics* – though, in order to leave room for *psychic* organizational processes (cf. Ward, 1883(2): 97), he does not want to include all of sociology under this title. In a similar way J.Q. Stewart consistently tries to reduce social phenomena to the level of the kinematical and the physical. He speaks about social *gravitation* (the mutual attraction of people), but explains the fact that human beings are not all pulled together at one point by using a *gas model* – representing human beings as clashing gas molecules (he speaks about 'human gas'):

Were it not for the expansive force of the human gas, representing the need of individuals for elbow room, the centre-seeking force of gravitation would eventually pile everyone up at one place (Stewart, 1948: 23; also compare his 1950 article and see Sorokin, 1966: 46 - 53).

These *mechanistic* and *physicalistic* trends – compare also the conceptions of Catton (1966) – highlights in a striking way to what an extent 19th century sociological theory suffered from a *reductionistic* orientation that disregards the multi-aspectual diversity in reality.

After the rise of *historicism* and the *linguistic turn* new options were explored in the course of the 20th century. After Tönnies (1957, 1965, 1972), Simmel (1908), Durkheim (1972), Oppenheimer (1922, 1926), Von Wiese (1926, 1955, 1959, 1966) and Weber (1921, 1949, 1964, 1973) it was particularly Parsons (1951, 1961, 1967, 1969, 1977a, 1977b) (and what became known as *structural functionalism*) that dominated the scene during the middle of the century. Neo-Marxism became more visible during the student revolts of the late 60's and the subsequent Habermas-discussion on positivism (see Adorno, 1970). More recently Alexander (and Münch – see Alexander, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1990a, 1990b and Münch, 1985, 1990, 1994) revitalized Parsonian system theory, Habermas also transformed and developed some of his own insights in confrontation with the system theory of Parsons (see Habermas, 1984, 1995-1, 1995-2, 1996, 1998), while Giddens took a different avenue with his theory of the *structuration* of human society (as a dynamic process enacted and reproduced by human being over time – see Giddens, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1996, 2002).

A brief look at the successive dominant trends of thought within the development of modern sociology provides us with diverging theoretical emphases – in most instances over-emphasizing some or other constitutive structural element within the social aspect of reality¹. The opposition between *atomistic* and *holistic* approaches practically cuts through all modern sociological stances². Already in a prior context, namely in the social contract theories of the early modern period – amongst others Hobbes, Thomasiaus, Pufendorf, Locke and Rousseau – the fictional abstraction of ‘isolated’ individuals is postulated in order to give a hypothetical account of the existing order within known societies, as if human individuals are only in a derived sense incorporated in social interaction. With good reason George Herbert Mead reacted to this abstraction by emphasizing the social context (co-) determining human existence from the very outset. By contrast, ever since Comte adhered to an *organicistic holism* subsequent sociological thinkers advanced the cause of a universalistic view of human society.

A recent revival of the initial *mechanistic* and physicalistic sociological theories mentioned above is found in the dynamic “field theory” developed by Sztompka. In it he wants to transcend the limitations of the systems model (Sztompka, 1994: 9 ff.). He aims to develop a *sociology of social change* that supersedes the doubtful validity of “organic-systemic models of society” as well as the very “dichotomy of social statics and social dynamics” (Sztompka, 1994: 9). His aim is to explore Whitehead's “processual image” which claims that “change is inherent in the very nature of things” (Sztompka, 1994: 9). But unfortunately he does not realize that (*social*) *change* presupposes (social) constancy.

Psychologistic theories followed suit by over-emphasizing the sensitive-psychical basis of human social relationships. Tönnies views *Gemeinschaft* as being “characterized by the social will as concord, folkways, mores, and religion” (Tönnies, 1957: 231) – although he confines the human will to “an organic and a rational part.” In the

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1. Within the tradition of Dooyeweerd's reformational philosophy a basic distinction is drawn between the fundamental aspects of reality – where each aspect reveals its meaning through its interconnectedness with all other aspects (evinced in retrociprocity and anticipatory analogies) – and the dimension of concrete (natural and social) entities and processes.
 2. Whereas individualism encloses being human within the (separated) existence of an individual – albeit sometimes conceived of as involved in interactions with other individuals – universalism takes the supposed “social nature” of human beings to mean that some or other social collectivity, or even ‘society’ itself, can encompass and absorb one's life fully (see Strauss, 2002:97).

sociological thought of Durkheim the *conscience collective* in the final analysis completely envelopes our whole consciousness and coincides in all points with it (Durkheim, 1972: 139)³.

A distortion of the logical-analytical analogy within the structure of the social aspect resulted in the opposition of consensus theories (Parsons and others) and conflict theories (Simmel, Rex, Dahrendorff). Social Darwinists (like Spencer, Gumpłowicz, Ratzenhofer and Sumner) using biotical “struggle for existence”-phenomena to explain social conflict, overlooks the fundamental *normative structure* of the social aspect of reality. Although the heritage of Hegel does leave room for the normative structuredness of social events, his dialectical approach (*thesis, antithesis, synthesis*) *misrepresents the relationship between normativity and factuality*. To Hegel the dialectical moment is given in the self-abolition of the concerned valid conditions and it is accompanied by the transition into that which is opposite (Hegel, 1968:35). Hegel in fact uses his dialectics as a means to re-unite the classical Greek dichotomy of thought and being (reason and reality) – an opposition that receives its highest unity in the idea as the “unity of concept and reality” (Hegel, 1931: 155).

Contradiction, conflict and antinormativity are all realities that result from human disobedience to the normativity of God's creational order. It is therefore understandable that theoretical accounts of social conflict concern *power* and *influence* (the basic elements in the conflict theories of Pareto, Sorel and others), that it concerns the *transition of conflict into accommodation* (cf. Park and Burgess), that it addresses the question of *functions* and *dysfunctions* (Merton) or the way in which tension-phenomena may use conflict to exercise an *integrative power* (Simmel and in his footsteps the extensive investigations of Coser). It appears nevertheless that the crucial element in all these divergent approaches is found in *anti-normative behavior of social subjects* or in a conflict about alternative *positivizations of social principles by competent social organs*.

In the absence of a clear cosmological distinction between the law-side (norm-side) and the factual side of reality, Dahrendorff identifies *historical change* with *conflict* – thus canceling the possibility of *responsible* (i.e., norm-conformative reformational) *historical changes*:

3. Compare Rousseau's conception of the social contract – which also transforms the abstract individual into an indivisible part of the body politic as a transpersonal whole: “Everyone of us collectively subject ourselves and all our power to the final guidance of the *volonté générale* (general will), and we receive again every member back as an indivisible part of the whole” (Rousseau, 1762:24).

As a factor in the ongoing process of social change conflict is an ultimate necessity (Dahrendorf, 1961: 124).

Later on in the work this identification is explicit:

All of social life is conflict, because it is change (Dahrendorf, 1961: 235).

Coser's reaction to Dahrendorf's stress on historical change is that the latter is guilty of a "pan-conflict imperialism" (Coser, 1970: 4). Dahrendorf explains their diverging views as follows: "According to the structural-functional theory conflict and change are pathological deviations from the norm of an equilibrating system; in terms of the theory I am defining stability and rigidity reveal the pathology of a society" (Dahrendorf, 1961:127).

The historical analogy within the social aspect concerns issues of continuity and discontinuity (revolution, reaction, reformation) as well as the importance of the distinction between power and an abuse of power. However, the fundamental postulate of Dahrendorf, namely that *society is inherently subject to historical change*, is caught up in the same antinomy which destroys all forms of historicism – the antinomy namely that at least *one* constant and enduring element should be accepted: *change itself*. Dahrendorf writes:

It is my basic thesis that it is the permanent task, meaning and result of social conflicts to maintain the global change of societies and their parts (Dahrendorf, 1961: 124).

This mode of speech shows remarkable similarities with the language-use of functionalism. A certain phenomenon – namely *conflict* – possesses the *function to maintain* something – namely *change!*

Against the foregoing background it is now aimed to analyse the sign analogy within the structure of the social aspect in more detail.

2. Social meaning and social interpretation

Viewed from the perspective of the retrociprocity coherence between the social aspect and the sign-mode every social action has, conveys something, which, in turn, requires social interpretation on the part of those who participate in the social process. The modal universality of the sign-mode thus calls for the recognition that human actions are always, in some way or other, intrinsically related to the "horizon of symbolic signification and interpretation" – the legitimate foundation distorted in the excessive claim of *postmodernism* that *everything is interpretation*.

The core meaning of the sign-mode

As the direct functional foundation of the social aspect, the sign-mode is characterized by expressive signification. This foundational position of the sign-mode is constitutive in the structure of the social aspect. On the one hand this implies that language (qualified by the sign-mode) is a pre-requisite for social interaction, and on the other hand the retrocipation to the sign-mode from the social aspect unveils a constitutive (retrociatory) analogical moment within the structure of the social aspect. Although Searle approaches this issue on the basis of the general shift to language as a new horizon, the fashion in which he articulates his argument approximates the just mentioned very closely:

The primary aim of this chapter is to explain and justify my claim that language is essentially constitutive of institutional reality (Searle, 1995: 59).

Owing to the developments in the science of *semiotics* we know today that lingual acts do not exhaust the meaning of the sign-mode. At the factual side of the sign-mode one may detect not only human beings (a lingual community) as subjects, but also a multiplicity of factual ‘sign-objects.’ The latter may be the product of human cultural formation – such as verbal and written languages, which are founded in the cultural-historical aspect – or they may be seen as independent of human cultural formation but still, via human acts of objectification, as having object functions in the sign-mode (for example, things of nature are objectified in the sign-mode when they are *named*). Threatening thunder clouds say something to human beings perceiving them and may be (correctly or mistakenly) interpreted as signs of an approaching thunder storm. Social actions, such as a polite greeting, a wave with the hand or the waiting at a door for someone respected, are all actions indicating socially significant conventions (cf. Weideman, 1977: 82 - 83).

Entering in different forms of social interaction not only presupposes a deepened lingual competence to communicate⁴, but also requires the ability to comprehend the structure and implications of meaningful actions performed by other social subjects.

It should not surprise us that after the general intellectual climate at the beginning of the 20th century started to proceed on the basis of the switch

4. Communication is a form of sharing meanings within the domain of a lingual community transcending as such the possibility of an individual to create her own idiosyncratic signs. As soon as one enters a lingual community there is no room left for a ‘private language.’ Communication is the social disclosure and deepening of the sign-mode.

to the new assessment of the centrality of *meaning* and of *interpretation*, we would discover philosophical developments exploring this new horizon in a way affecting the field of sociological theorizing. Already Georg Simmel stressed the nature of social interaction. To this we can add the names of persons like W. James, C.H. Cooley, J.M. Baldwin and J. Dewey. However, it was foremost George Herbert Mead who combined elements from various traditions – thus providing the starting-point of what became known as *symbolic interactionism* in sociological theory.

2.1 Mead's contribution to symbolic interactionism

In his extensive work: *The Philosophy of the Act*, Mead explores the contours of his contribution. He has a clear understanding of the mechanistic tendency dominant in modern physics ever since Galileo:

The concept of nature which was introduced by Galileo through his doctrine of dynamics, reduced it to a statement of matter in motion (Mead, 1945: 357).

He points out that this doctrine, reducing reality to “extended matter in motion” (Mead, 1945: 358), discards the possibility of ‘mind’ since it denies the existence of so-called secondary qualities (such as color, sound, warmth, taste as well as the affective properties of things) (Mead, 1945: 358 - 359). The mechanical theory of nature which has dominated modern science seems bound to state the relations of minds to matter and matter to mind in terms of *mechanical processes* which by their nature leave no place for mind and so-called mental processes (Mead, 1945: 359).

The parallelistic reaction to this legacy, on the contrary, wanted to guarantee human consciousness (and mind) as transcending mechanistic description:

In general, the connections between the experiencing individual and the things experienced – conceived in their physical reality – were reduced to a passive conditioning of states of consciousness by a mechanical nature. Into such a mind was carried ... whatever in nature could not be stated in terms of matter in motion (Mead, 1945: 359).

Within this mould of thought mind would possess a world of representation which is simply a duplication of the physical world, leaving “the connection between this world and the physical world” a *mystery* (Mead, 1945: 360).

This sketch given by Mead also reveals that he had a good understanding of the inherent *dualism* of nature and freedom present in the modern philosophy. This motivating power already inspired Descartes's dualism between space and thought (*res extensa* and *res cogitans*). His

continuation of the spatial character of material bodies shows that he was not yet acquainted with Galileo's mechanics. In an attempt to overcome the dualism between his two substances, Descartes accepts the physical effect of a small cerebral gland influencing human consciousness (the *parva glandula*). Mead, in his own way, also attempts to transcend the basic dualism in humanistic thought.

According to him the “biological individual” could only develop a mind and a self through a *social process*. It is this peculiar development which generates the interest of the “social psychologist” (Mead, 1967: 1). Mead starts his treatment of the problem of mind with the parallelism of Wundt (*Völkerpsychologie*, Vol.I). According to Mead we received from Wundt a most valuable distinction, namely that between *gesture* and *social acts*. A gesture only later becomes a *symbol* though as such it is already present in the initial phases of a social action (Mead, 1967: 42). The term ‘gesture’ may be identified with these beginnings of social acts which are stimuli for the response of other forms (Mead, 1967: 43).

If we see a dangerous animal ready to attack we know it without being able to say whether the animal itself *means* it in the sense of being *determined*, on the basis of prior reflection, to *attack*. However, if someone would swing her fist in front of your face you surely suppose that she means something, that there is an idea behind the gesture:

When, now, that gesture *means* this idea behind it and arouses that idea in the other individual, then we have a *significant symbol*. In the case of the dog-fight we have a gesture which calls our appropriate response; in the present case we have a *symbol* which answers the *meaning* in the experience of the first individual and which also calls out the meaning in the second individual (Mead, 1967: 45 - 46).

At this point the gesture becomes language – it becomes a meaningful symbol designating a certain meaning (Mead, 1967: 46). Mead emphasizes that “significant symbols” are to be seen as “gestures which possess meanings and are hence more than mere substitute stimuli” (Mead, 1967: 75). As such the body is not a self: “it becomes a self only when it has developed a mind within the context of social experience” (Mead, 1967: 50). He explicitly states: “selves must be accounted for in terms of the social process” (Mead, 1967: 49).

In addition we have to consider, so Mead continues, that symbolizing constitutes objects that were not previously constituted – “objects which would not exist except for the context of social relationships wherein symbolization occurs” (Mead, 1967: 78).

Along these lines Mead transposes meaning from ‘consciousness’ to become one of the co-constitutive factors leading to the genesis and existence of new objects in the social situation (Mead, 1967: 78). The interpretation of gestures is seen as an external process, taking place within the field of social experience (Mead, 1967: 78 - 79). *Symbolization* (we would prefer to speak about symbolical objectification – DFMS) and *interpretation* are *socially determined*. Acknowledging the undeniably present social aspect of the subjective act of objectification and interpretation, does not imply that we have to deny all the other modal aspects of a subjective human act like this. It seems as if Mead himself wants to provide a protection against an over-emphasized social dimension – by distinguishing between the ‘I’ and the ‘me.’ In an attempt to leave room open for the active and creative self of a person, another social psychologist advances similar conceptions.

The expressive coherence that is required in performance points out a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves. As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next (Goffman, 1959: 56).

In line with his pre-occupation with metaphors from aesthetic life (poems and dramas), Goffman sees our performance in front of other people as the taking on of different roles in front of an audience. In this regard the human mind undergoes a certain ‘bureaucratization’ and is subjected to a certain social discipline (Goffman, 1959: 56, 57).

Mead views the unity of the self as more encompassing as the unity of the mind (Goffman, 1967: 144, note 4). However, the self is still merely a unity-in-the-multiplicity of aspects of the total social process. Compare some typical statements:

The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience (Goffman, 1967: 140); The unity and structure of the complete self reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole (Goffman, 1967: 144); In other words, the various elementary selves which constitute, or are organized into, a complete self are the various aspects of the structure of the complete self answering to the various aspects of the structure of the social process as a whole; the structure of the complete self is thus a reflection of the complete social process; ... these aspects being the different social groups to which he belongs within the process (Goffman, 1967: 144).

Mead wants to account for each of the multiple functions human beings perform in different life-forms. Though the uniqueness of each of these roles reflects the distinctness of diverse spheres of life, it does not imply

that the unity of being human (the ‘self’) is just the organizational unity of these different social functions (social ‘selves’). Amidst the multifaceted existence of a person the social aspect is just one of many aspects. The human self-hood forms the central point of reference of all these modal functions and can never be exhausted by anyone of them.

Complementary to the elements of constraint present in the social process Mead postulates and ‘I’ distinct from the ‘self.’ He relates the phases of development of the ‘self’ to play, to the game and to the “generalized other” (Mead, 1967: 152 - 164). If persons observe themselves in abstracto from the perspective of the generalized other, they in fact subject themselves to the effect of demands laid upon them by some or other social institution – and thus experience a form of a behavioral control.

It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members: for it is in this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual’s thinking (Mead, 1967: 155).

When he treats the ‘I,’ Mead pertinently puts it over against the ‘social me’ (Mead, 1967: 173). Does he locate the ‘I’ in a different dimension of reality, or is he simply in search of a different modal perspective?

Through the social self every individual possesses, in a specific situation (via the determining influences exerted on the behavior of an individual by the generalized other), the attitudes of others asking for a specific reaction. This constitutes the ‘self’ of the situation. The ‘own’ action in the situation, nonetheless, flows from the ‘I’ and it is more or less uncertain (Mead, 1967: 177). From his subsequent analyses it turns out that Mead views of the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ as phases of the ‘self’ (Mead, 1967: 192 ff.).

The ‘I’ reacts to the ‘self’ who originates from the acceptance of the attitudes of others:

Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the ‘me’ and we react to it as an ‘I’ (Mead, 1967: 174).

At this point Meads introduces an unexpected distinction, namely that between the present and the past. The ‘I’ of the present is found in the ‘me’ of the next moment:

‘I’ become a ‘me’ in so far as I remember what I said ... It is because of the ‘I’ that we say we are never fully aware of what we are, that we surprise ourselves by our action. It is as we act that we are aware of ourselves. It is in memory that the ‘I’ is constantly present in experience (Mead, 1967: 174).

As that what is given as the ‘I’ is of course a ‘me,’ even if the latter was the ‘I’ of an earlier moment. The basic denominator used by Mead in this context is clearly seen from his words:

If you ask, then, where directly in your own experience that ‘I’ comes in, the answer is that it comes in as a historical (the author’s emphasis – DFMS) figure (Mead, 1967: 174).

Without being aware of them, Mead creates serious problems for his conception. The ‘self,’ which is essentially socially constituted, falls apart in two phases of the ‘social self,’ namely the ‘I’ and the ‘me.’ This split partially abolishes the social unity of the ‘self’, since, as a historical figure, the ‘I’(-self) is no longer social in nature. In addition, within the social context, the ‘me’(-self) is transposed to the past. This raises the question whether the present, in any sense, still shares in the social dimension of reality? If the ‘I’-self is merely a phase of the total unity of the social self, the social, in this regard, has to participate in the historical present – a privilege explicitly reserved for the ‘I.’ The dispersion of the ‘self’ in a historically present ‘I’-self and socially bygone ‘my’-self is dialectically re-united in the non-homogeneous unity of the ‘social self.’ Both these (dialectically opposed) elements, namely the ‘I’ and the ‘me’, are, according to Mead “essential to the self in its full expression” (Mead, 1967: 199).

The ‘me,’ in a certain sense, exerts social control over the ‘I.’ Without this constraint the ‘I’ would be impulsive and uncontrolled, requiring the ‘me’ as a censor in the Freudian sense of the term (Mead, 1967: 210). This introduction of Freudian elements generates additional problems. The impulsive uncontrollability of the ‘I’ reflects a trait of the organism which dialectically opposes the spontaneous creativity and initiative-taking freedom of the historically present ‘I.’ Later on in this work Mead explains the relationship between the ‘biologic individual’ and the ‘self adjusted to its social environment’ (Mead, 1967: 371). On the next page he calls this individual-in-action the ‘organized group of impulses which I called the biologic individual’ (Mead, 1967: 372). Zeitlin correctly remarks that “the ‘biologic I’ exists in a definite state of tension with the social ‘me’ ” (Zeitlin, 1984: 53).

Contemporaneous to the development of Mead’s ideas, the existential phenomenological thinker, Merleau-Ponty, for a great part relying on the results of psychological and psycho-pathological studies, also understands human beings dialectically in terms of two basic denominators: *bodyliness* (taken in a biotical sense as an *organism*) and *existence* (interpreted as being *historical* in nature). On the one hand, together with Sartre, he

accepts the thesis: “I am my body.” On the other hand, however, he also holds the opinion that man's historical existence must repress the bodily organism down to the pre-personal level of an anonymous organic complex (see Merleau-Ponty 1970: 75, 79, 80, 82 - 84, 86, 88). Perhaps Karl Jaspers saw the impasse of this whole dialectical legacy of humanism most clearly. His confession reads:

Since freedom is only through and against nature, as freedom it must fail.
Freedom is only when nature is (Jaspers, 1948: 871).

The recognition of the foundational role of the aspects and structures of nature does not require a *dialectical* perspective, since it concerns the *integral meaning-coherence* between the normative and the natural aspects of reality. The freedom which social actions exhibit can never be construed in *opposition* to the foundational conditions of human functioning. Freedom is not *against* nature. It is only possible *on the basis of nature* and it is directed by *normative principles* allowing for *accountable choices* which could be executed in a *normatively correct* or an *antinormative way*.

2.2 Variants within symbolic interactionism

The later developments of this sociological trend are largely stimulated by the ‘social behaviorism’ of Mead. The focus upon interaction almost consistently lead to the avoidance of *macro-concepts*. Concepts such as *culture, society, community and institution* are either merely seen as *nominal categories* which should be reduced to an inter-personal level, or they are seen as a *delimiting framework* within which interaction takes place. Warshay mentions seven variants of symbolic interactionism: The schools of Blumer and Iowa, the trend accentuating interaction at the cost of language (Faris, Rose, H.S. Becker, Stone and others), the role theory (Newcomb, Biddle, Sargent, Sarbin), the dramaturgical school investigating the complexity of role, self and image manipulation (Goffman, Klapp, Messinger), the field theory approach aiming at a fusion of the conceptions of Mead, Lewin and Lundberg (Coutou) and an existentialist and/or phenomenological school (Pfeutze, Bolton, Natanson, Wager) (Warshay, 197m5: 30 ff.).

A brief comparison of the schools of Chicago and Iowa nonetheless clearly shows that they depend on diverging ‘modal skeletons.’ The broader context within which interaction is positioned coheres with different elementary basic concepts.

Herbert Blumer (Chicago) and Helmut Kuhn (Iowa) are two prominent representatives of symbolic interactionism. Some of the important

differences between these two sociologists are of a methodological nature. Blumer orients himself to a method of empathy and an intuitive understanding (*Verstehen*) of symbolic interaction. His famous statement is that society is symbolic interaction. Based on this orientation Blumer wants to reserve a distinct approach for sociology. Kuhn, on the contrary, simply sees the methodology of sociology as an extension of that of the natural sciences. Therefore it should not surprise us that Kuhn defends a deterministic approach, whereas Blumer wants to leave room for the spontaneous freedom of social action.

Blumer directly follows Mead in his distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' (cf. Meltzer and Petras, 1970: 9 ff.). The 'I' represents the unconstrained, undisciplined and spontaneous nature of the individual while the 'me' refers to the effect of group relations on the individual. Kuhn cancels the unpredictable freedom of the 'I' and only accepts the 'me.' For him this implies that social behavior is in principle predictable on the basis of internalized expectations. Because preceding conditions determine the human self and because the human self finally determines human actions, Kuhn holds that human behavior is completely determined.

This fundamental divergence between the thought of Blumer and Kuhn undoubtedly is a manifestation of the radical dialectic enclosed in the humanistic ground motive of nature and freedom. It illustrates to us that the focus on symbolic interaction could be supported by theoretical articulations which are for the rest radically opposed.

In an individualistic fashion the approach of Blumer emphasizes that all social processes – such as the internalization of cultural patterns, social control and group formation – are based upon the creative freedom of symbolic interaction (cf. Turner, 1977: 183). Similar to other sociological trends, also in the case of symbolic interactionism it turns out that merely a few analogical concepts are considered to be sufficient to functional as constitutive building blocks in sociological theorizing. Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds mention research done by the latter. He conducted an empirical survey regarding those concepts considered by symbolic interactionists as indispensable (restricted to the number 7). The most frequent concepts were role, self and interaction, as well as culture and norm. Though the latter two are also amply used by the functionalist tradition, they do not entail, within the context of symbolic interactionism, a reference to the structure of society. Concepts such as power, social class and conflict are only mentioned by a few sociologists (Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds, 1975: 116 - 117).

The standard criticism levelled against symbolic interactionism normally points at its micro-sociological limitation. These authors nevertheless hold that this is merely a practical limitation and not a limitation of principle. One may accept this defence, though it would have been easier to do it if symbolic interactionism would have transcended its inherent nominalistic view of society – acknowledging only individuals in interaction – and if they would have developed a more articulated analysis of the difference and mutual coherence of the social and the sign modes of reality, transcending the flat identification: society is symbolic interaction.

In order to distinguish between social interaction and symbolic interaction one has to begin with an account of the nuclear meaning of both these aspects before one can enter into an analysis of the mutual coherence between both. Social symbolism, social significance, social meaning construction, social expression, and social interpretation should then be located as retrocipatory elements within the structure of the social aspect, incapable of solely explaining the full complexity of the inter-modal coherence reflected within the structure of the social aspect.

Reverting the focus, we also have to mention the anticipatory coherence between these two aspects as it is seen from the perspective of the sign-mode. The social disclosure of the sign-mode manifest in human communication reflects a multiplicity of social contexts. Particularly Garfinkel and other adherents of the ethnomethodological school explored this view-point. What people say to each other in concrete social contexts cannot be deduced from some or other ‘objective’ semantic code, such as a dictionary. Therefore all situations where dialogue takes place presupposes the implicit acceptance of a given background. Rejecting the privileged position assigned by symbolic interactionism to an observer, ethnomethodology asks our attention for an investigation of different methods of reporting related to the uniqueness of particular situations (cf. Johnson *et al.*, 1984: 108). In the final analysis ethnomethodology carries the irrationalistic leg of nominalism to its extreme: we have to accept the contingency of social processes constituting social reality⁵.

Though it is important fully to acknowledge the uniqueness of every contingent social situation, this does not mean that we can escape from the universal normative conditions making possible such positivizing actions.

5. The modern humanistic motive of logical creation, employed by Kant in his rationalistic elevation of understanding to the level of formal law-giver of nature, is here continued in an irrationalistic fashion.

In a different context Pannenberg expresses a noticeable insight in the complementarity of contingency and law-conformity:

One can only determine laws and law-conformities in relation to what is contingent (Pannenberg, 1973: 125).

That all social actions and social processes presuppose and imply social symbolism and social interpretation was explored by symbolic interactionism, though we have discerned a strong tendency of reductionism as well as an individualistic preference for small group interaction. However, the meaning of the social aspect can never be revealed without its inner coherence with the sign-mode. Consequently, acknowledging the legitimate place of this foundational coherence would ensure a lasting place for concepts such as social symbolic meaning and social interpretation within the arsenal of elementary basic concepts of sociology.

3. Conclusion

All those trends in modern sociological theory that elevated certain analogical elements within the structure of the social aspect did that while distorting the meaning-coherence of the social aspect with other structural moments. Yet each one of them did see a real structural moment within the social aspect *worthwhile of acknowledgement*. In a sense this constitutes the relative merit of all one-sided emphases – and even while misrepresenting the true meaning of the social aspect these schools of thought highlighted facets that we have to take into account in order to come to a comprehensive understanding of the many-sided interconnected meaning of the social aspect. In the final analysis sociological theory ought to pursue the path of a non-reductionist ontology in order to sidestep the pitfalls and antinomies involved in reductionist modes of thought.

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