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Interaction and All that

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I remember very vividly a discussion I had not so long ago with a philosophical friend of mine, one of the rare people equally well informed about the goings on in contemporary philosophy and about all the latest in sociology and social psychology. We started in complete agreement: what a pity it was that philosophers nowadays know so very little of what is going on in sociology and social psychology. Yes, and sociologists relatively little of what was going on in philosophy. But then of course philosophers often seemed to speak a language of their own. Yes, and sociologists too have their own jargon. We agreed. Or at least we seemed to agree.

I am sure you know the gambit well enough. Very civilised. Good will on all sides. What stands out most clearly in my mind is the point at which the basic disagreement came into the open and it became clear that we could not really play a game together. For the basic rules underlying our moves were different.

I said: Of course, you know, sociologists are not in the first place concerned with individual people, but with social systems, functions, roles, institutions and that sort of thing. Yes, I know that, he said; certainly, one can read it everywhere. But among ourselves what are they, these systems, if not a number of individual people who more or less co-operate or perhaps fight, but certainly people like you and me. That is not quite the point, I said and, foolishly using the old gag, mumbled something about societies being something else than merely a sum total of individual people. Yes, he said, quite right; but you know, and with this he looked me straight in the face, when all is said and done what else is there but individual people? This Gestalt thing is probably quite true; but fundamentally what else are societies or 'social systems' as you call them, but individual people who interact.

I remember. At that moment in the discussion it became clear to me that the fault must be ours. It has been set out again and again by sociologists what they try to do. They have developed wonderful theories about institutions and social facts as facts *sui generis,* but somehow it does not seem to come through. For most people the reality of individual people whom one can see and feel and of which oneself is one is so overwhelmingly strong, so immediately intelligible, that this other reality of which we try to speak – institutions, or functions or social data generally – for most people remains something a bit ghostlike, and talk about it a kind of jargon as against the

immediacy of the experience of another person, of her or him or you and myself. There was a man, a philosopher with an intellect of a very high calibre who had read and in fact taught most of the current sociological literature and was sure he had understood it; in fact, he used it a good deal in his lectures. And yet when it came to brass tacks, he really had not understood a thing. However much we may speak of roles and functions and that sort of thing, in the last resort what is there, he said, but individual people in interaction. Interaction seemed to be the keyword. And so it is either directly or indirectly in a great deal of the literature on theoretical sociology. It implies, though one may not always be aware of it, a *genetic idea*, an idea as to how social phenomena originate and an *explanatory* conception, an assumption, that is, of the way in which social phenomena can be explained. In its simplest form, the standard form of what today might be regarded by most people simply as *common sense*, it can be represented by a model of the following type: there are a number of people; they interact. The product of their interaction is what we call institutions and other social phenomena. If you want to explain these phenomena you must know the motives of the former, of the acting individuals. In this *common sense* form the latter, individual motives, are what one has to look for if one wants to explain the former. This is the tacit assumption underlying a good deal of the work of general or political historians, who with a few memorable exceptions never bother very much about the type of explanations they use, but accept almost as a matter of course the type of explanations used in society at large. [Give examples.[1]] In a slightly more subtle form the same type of explanation for social facts is used by Freud and many of his followers. Here quite explicitly individual motivations are used as explanations for social data.

Examples: If it is in the nature of man to have a disposition for guilt feelings in connection with his parents and especially his father (in the case of a male person), as Freud assumed it is, then you can explain many social institutions as an effect of which these personal feelings are the cause.

But of course, openly or in a more disguised form, the same assumption is one of the ruling leitmotivs in the history of sociological theory. Only while general historians or psychologists can use this common sense model of explanations for social facts naively without qualm, most theoretical sociologists who use this model of explanation find themselves in a kind of dilemma usually more apparent to those who come after them than to themselves. From Spencer via Max Weber to Ginsberg and Talcott Parsons, one can find exactly the same problem. It usually leads to two types of explanations standing side-by-side whose relationship to each other remains more or less unexplained. I will say more about this peculiar dilemma and

[1] Elias typed ‘Give examples’ in the manuscript, obviously as a note to himself to improvise in the course of his lecture. – eds.

inconsistency in these and other current sociological theories later on. It may be enough here for the moment to show one side, the interaction hypothesis in which the individual is, so to say, the starting point and society the final product.

In *Spencer* you have it right at the beginning of his *Study of Sociology* where he says 'that the properties of the units determine the properties of the whole they make up, evidently holds of societies as of other things'.[2] And he goes on to say with that precision and lucidity of expression which, in spite of much waste and the inner contradictions that rent his work apart, makes many of these pages still enjoyable and stimulating reading:

> there is no adequate recognition of the truth that from these individual qualities must result certain qualities in an assemblage of individuals; that in proportion as the individuals forming one assemblage are like in their qualities to the individuals forming another assemblage, the two assemblages will have likenesses; and that the assemblages will differ in their characters in proportion as the component individuals of the one differ from those of the other.[3]

Of course, he never explained and, so far as I know, never really tried to explain how this conception of societies whose properties can be explained as the effects of which the properties of individuals are the cause links up with the concept of societies as super-organisms, products of an evolutionary process.

Circular type of explanation

Going beyond the common sense level, Kardiner [speaks of the] 'primary institution' [of] the family [that] moulds individuals so as to fit them for secondary institutions.[4] The term 'primary' still leaves some doubt. It is evidently used by Kardiner, as in much of the psycho-analytical literature, with reference to the individual. But it might suggest to the unwary that the family is the primary cause of which all individual properties and the institutions carried on by them are the effects. I do not say that Kardiner himself suggests that. But the term 'primary' in this context can be misleading.

Of course, Ginsberg in a general way proposed long ago the type of circular model of explanation which among the initiated has become widely accepted nowadays. But

[2] Herbert Spencer, The Study of Sociology (London: Henry S. King, 1873), chapter III, p. 51.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 51–2.
[4] The text is briefly in note form here. Elias gives no reference, but probably he is referring to Abram Kardiner, The Individual and His Society: The Psychodynamics of Primitive Social Organization (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939). – eds.

his formulations also show that this is far from being the solution of the problem, merely in a new form lead[ing] up to it.

'Sociology, broadly', he wrote in his *Studies in Sociology* in 1932, 'is the study of human interactions, their conditions and consequences.'[5] That is a comprehensive definition, somewhat qualifying the word 'interaction' by including conditions. Still, unmistakably, if this definition means anything, it means that the explanations for social phenomena have to be found in the individuals who interact. And Ginsberg goes on very carefully to explain that, in contrast to others, he does not believe that 'social interactions are always consciously determined'. In other words, the motives which guide individuals in interacting with each other are not always 'rational'. Emotional impulses and unconscious motives also play their part. But all that merely confirms the impression gained from the definition of sociology as the study of interactions, that the explanations of social phenomena should be sought in the motives of individual people. These are the cause, one must assume, and the shape of institutions and other social phenomena the effect. And this impression is only slightly qualified by a certain circularity of causation proposed by Ginsberg. It is difficult, he wrote, to attain the ideal of sociological explanation which 'would be attained if every social event could be traced back to its sources in the vital psychical forces of individuals as moulded by the complex interactions which constitute the life of the community, in contact with the outer environment.'[6]

The accent, as you can see, is still very unambiguously on the individual and his motives as the immediate explanation of social events. Taken at its face value, this means that, in the last resort or ideally speaking, all sociology can be reduced to psychology. The ideal explanation would be attained if in the first instance one could unravel all vital and psychical forces of individuals which, by interacting, so it seems, produce this social event. Vital and psychical forces I understand to mean motives unconscious as well as conscious.

Talcott Parsons and his group, especially Edward Shils, are far more explicit. They are more clearly aware than Ginsberg that this is a problem still unsolved. But in part perhaps because of this, the inner contradictions of their system start out more clearly. If one often finds them involved and complicated in their way of thinking, it is in part because they have constantly to struggle with the inner contradictions inherent in their basic positions. I hope you won't mind if I take some examples.

[5] Morris Ginsberg, 'The scope of sociology', *Studies in Sociology* (London, Methuen, 1932). We have been unable to check this quotation, but a similar essay, 'The scope and method of sociology' appears as the first chapter of Ginsberg's much more reprinted (and translated) book *Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1934). There (p. 7), Ginsberg inserts 'and interrelations' after 'interactions'. – eds.
[6] *Ibid.*

Much depends on it, in my opinion, for the practical tasks which sociologists have to solve, for the research problems before them, that the reason should be cleared up why contemporary theoretical sociologists confuse rather than help and guide in the outlay and conduct of empirical research. And there can be no doubt that among the theoretical sociologists of our time Parsons and Shils[7] have driven our theoretical thinking as far as one can possibly go without clearing up the fundamental problem which I have outlined: that however much people may concede to Durkheim and others that social events cannot simply be explained as a result of individual events, in the end most theories do just that! They cannot get away from the idea that one must proceed more or less as the physicists do, namely, to seek explanations of the more complex composite systems as a result of the behaviour and interaction of simpler component units which at this level are individuals.

Perhaps I can give you an idea of the way in which Parsons hovers, like Spencer, Max Weber, Ginsberg and others, uneasily on the brink of this problem without ever quite facing it.

'The meaning which Parsons gives to *social system*', says Timasheff in his *Sociological Theory, its Nature and Growth*, 'varies from place to place in his analysis'.

> Social system is first defined as a plurality of individual actors interacting with one another. Elsewhere it is said to be a network of relations between actors or a network of interactive relationships. This diversity of definition raises the important conceptual question: are the 'material points' of the social system the actors themselves or social relationships?
>
> Again, the social system is described as a plurality of individuals who are motivated by a tendency to optimum gratification and whose relation to this situation is defined in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared patterns.[8]

If a person becomes a king, structure as an explanatory concept of individual actions, not the other way round. System not of interaction but of *interdependencies*. Not beginning in individual player, he always enters a play while it is being played.[9]

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[7] Elias gives no reference, but is probably thinking particularly of Parsons and Shils's joint essay 'Values, motives and systems of action', in Parsons and Shils (eds), Toward a General Theory of Action (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), pp. 45–275. – eds.

[8] Nicholas Timasheff, *Sociological Theory, its Nature and Growth* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), p. 240.

[9] This paragraph is in note form and almost illegible in the original typescript, but we think the meaning is clear enough. – eds.

In commenting on some of the contemporary efforts towards a sociological theory, I must make some preliminary remarks about the spirit and aim in which I comment and often criticise these efforts. It does not, I think, detract from their merits if one can point out the weak spots in what often is an imposing building. I think that a more lively discussion about theoretical matters is absolutely imperative if sociologists are not going to develop into a number of national and therefore inevitably parochial little groups or cliques. What is more, the development of a more useful and more unified sociological theory as a basis of empirical research is a task too big not only for one man, but also for one national group. The next step in the development of a sociological theory which the men of the practice can find useful as a guide depends on our ability to learn from and, if necessary, to criticise the existing theories. The prevailing attitude of polite acknowledgement or, as for instance with regard to the imposing work of the American theorists, polite disregard or shrugging of shoulders does not lead us anywhere. A thorough familiarity with the aims and essence of these theories alone can help us to see where the shoe pinches, and to develop a more fitting, more adequate theory.

And here I must say a word about theory making in general. It is nothing arbitrary. The idea that it is something more or less arbitrary is often hidden under laudatory epithets. One may call observing or collecting evidence a humdrum affair, but theory making creative. Meaning that if you collect evidence you have to be very careful to verify what you say, but if you make a theory you are more or less free to say what you like as long as it is not in glaring contradiction with some of the evidence. Nothing can be further from the truth. Theory making is a coordinating activity. It requires the ability to keep in mind a great many facts, often a great many data at the same time and to work out a model showing how they are connected; or, if there are great gaps, suggesting by means of a model how they *might* be connected. But if the accents in this model are more influenced by the author's wishes than by what can be observed, in principle at least by everybody, by an observer with a very different set of wishes and ideals – if that is the case, the coordination becomes confused, unnecessarily complex and so forth.

I believe that this is in fact the case with present-day sociologists. I believe that they can't build a model which makes the observation fall into pattern, and in a simple pattern at that, because certain political and social ideals interfere with their sight and vision. The central point of this distortion, due to what I call their involvement, is the relationship between individual and society. Present-day theories, it is my contention, all start in their building of models from individual people and their interaction. They build up theories grouped around the concept of individuals in interaction or in action, to refer to the Parsonian theory, because they live in societies in which much stress is laid on the freedom of the individual, in societies with a strong liberal tradition, and because to approach societies in any other way would

run counter to very deeply felt beliefs, or at least seem to run counter to these beliefs and to align oneself with the enemy. Of course, this is not a conscious and deliberate consideration: it is just that one cannot just distantiate oneself sufficiently in making a theory about society in general from the mould in which one's own mind has been cast as a member of a very specific society, an individualistic society. Now let me say at once that I share the ideals and beliefs usually centred around the concept of individual freedom. If anything, I believe that we have not gone far enough in attaining it in Western societies, to say nothing of those who go by the name of the East. But it is my profound conviction that one can only attain greater freedom or, to use a less hallowed word, greater scope of choice and action for individual people, if one sees very clearly how people are tied to each other. As you will see later, this is what I think should form the centrepiece of any theory of society, not the concept of interaction of a number of – more or less freely interacting – individual people, but the nature and structure of their interdependencies. For it depends on this, on the way in which people are dependent on each other with all that this involves, how much scope for action they have. And it is this, the network of interdependencies which bind individuals to each other, which seems to me the essence of what we call social structure. This is the condition of their interactions, the framework which determines how far and in what manner they interact.

And I do not stress this network of interdependencies as the central concept contrasting it with that of interaction – I do not stress it, you must believe me – in order to have another concept to my name. I do not believe, as I said, that theory making is something arbitrary.

I am stressing this aspect because I have found in my own empirical researches again and again that this is what I have to look into first: What are the dependencies of these people on each other?

Let me give you an example. If you live in an industrial society with a money economy, you are dependent on others in a different way from that which would be your lot if you lived as one in a tribe of simple hunters. Now, you can very systematically and with great precision give an account of the web of interdependencies in a given society. In fact, that is exactly what a number of social anthropologists do (though unfortunately not all) and that is what some sociologists do. You can couch in terms of superiority and subordination or in terms such as employers and employees. You can say that the structure of a business enterprise today looks different from that of a hundred years ago and can make a sketch of this structure from worker via shop steward with the foreman as a frontiersman between management and the workers and so on in a complex hierarchical order up to the managing director and the shareholders. You can analyse such a structure without

referring to any particular individual with this or that name. You can analyse it as such as an institutionalised set of interdependencies between people.

There are various problems of explanation with which one is confronted in studying such a structure. You might try to explain the function which such a structure has in the larger society of which it forms a part. Or you may wish to explain in what way it developed historically. In that case you would have to investigate the factors which make for increasing specialisation and new forms of integration of specialised functions on increasingly higher levels. But the one thing you could not do is to explain such a structure by investigating the actions, the motives and modes of interaction which form such a structure here and now. In terms of power it is such a structure or, more generally, the web of interdependencies between people, which determines their individual actions, channels and moulds their motivations and the mode of their interaction, not the other way round. Perhaps this is best illustrated if you take as an example a job. A job may be there for a time even if no one has it (so to say); it may be unoccupied. People advertise jobs, which means there is a function of a firm shape and in a most specific way connected with other functions or jobs whose holders are hampered in the performance of their function if that which is at present unoccupied and advertised as open is not filled. Now, the individual who is appointed to this job has to fit into it. He has to adjust himself to it. And his adjustment is an adjustment not only to the particular skills required in order to perform this job, but also an adjustment to the particular interdependencies with others into which a man is brought if he takes on such a job. Admittedly, different types of jobs have a different degree of elasticity: they give larger or smaller scope for individual variations. A worker's job has a small elasticity compared with that of a manager; and an Undersecretary of State again a smaller than that of the Prime Minister. I need not go further here. All I want to say is that you cannot understand the task of sociology, nor build up a sufficient theory of society, if you put it out in your theory that you have to start thinking from the individual personality and his actions and go on then, as for example Parsons's theory of action does, to the interaction between – to use again Parsons's words – an ego and an alter, and then somehow try to arrive as a result of this interaction to roles or functions or social structure. In theory, and certainly in practice even more, you will find that jobs or any other kind of function into which people are thrust from birth in accordance with the society in which they live can under no circumstances be reduced to the level of the individual; they are phenomena *sui generis,* as Durkheim said quite rightly, whose structure, connection and genesis can be studied as such. And that is in fact what we are doing: if we study a profession, we do not study the individual holders of the profession, but the profession as such. I am sorry to say that I have not yet seen a study of a profession which satisfies my sense of precision in these matters, but I hope shortly to publish

the second part of my study on naval officers[10] which can easily be used as an example or illustration of what I have just been saying: I am investigating there the development of social function. I try to show how and why, for example, within the framework of English society such a job as that of a midshipman developed while the corresponding job or function in the French navy – in correspondence with this very different nature of the French social system – was very different. In short, I investigate the development of social functions as such, but I don't try first to investigate individual actions.

On the contrary, the right mode of procedure – right in the sense of appropriate to the requirements of the problems which social data seem to offer to me – is the reverse from that suggested by the prevailing interaction theories; interaction in the sense that they enjoin us to start thinking from the individual, and to consider the social units which individuals form as something to be understood and explained from the individuals who interact, in the same way in which the structure and properties of composites like metals can be explained from those of their simplest component parts. I suggest that the problems with which we are confronted can only be brought nearer solution if one proceeds in a directly opposite manner: if one starts from the composite structure, social system or however you care to call it, which can only be explained and understood in terms of another social structure. Social events and social phenomena, in other words, according to my view, can never be explained by other than social events; they can never be explained more specifically by events on the individual level. Rather the reverse is the case: individuals, their motives and actions, which represent part events within the framework of the social system, can only be explained in terms of the social system of which they form part.
As I have said elsewhere: in social sciences, in contrast to physical sciences, to achieve results instead of thinking from the smaller to the larger system, one has to think, as it were, from the larger to the part system; and the individual is always, is in fact by his very nature, part of a larger social system without which he does not become, even if he could survive, an individual personality.

[10] The only part of Elias's study of the naval profession (which he had begun under the supervision of H. L. Beales at the London School of Economics during the Second World War) that was published in his lifetime was 'Studies in the Genesis of the Naval Profession: Part 1', in the *British Journal of Sociology* 1: 4 (1950), pp. 291–309. This was announced as 'Part 1' of three. The only other product of this research that Elias saw through to publication was in Dutch: 'Drake en Doughty: De ontwikkeling van een conflict', *De Gids* 140 (1977), pp. 223–37, translated from the manuscript 'Drake and Doughty: a paradigmatic case study'. The section on the role of midshipman of which Elias speaks here was not published until the (still incomplete) manuscripts were brought together in *The Genesis of the Naval Profession*, edited by René Moelker and Stephen Mennell (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007). – eds.

That then is my fundamental objection to those theories which, like that of Spencer or Max Weber and now of Parsons, hover uneasily between two levels, the connection of which is usually obscure. Spencer, as is only too well known, while theoretically postulating that societies are, as it were, composites which should be studied by studying first their components, did in practice nothing of the kind. Nor did Max Weber. They held the liberal convictions, according to which the individual was the *fons et origo* of all things social; and probably so do Parsons and many others. I don't think that my convictions are very different from theirs, except that I believe that we live in the West, as in the East, though undoubtedly the East more than in the West, still in extremely restrictive societies.

My main concern is to help, unhampered as far as possible by any blinds one might have before one's eyes, in developing theories which will not be remote, but closely applicable to empirical research and to social practice. I am convinced that we can only go ahead with all our research tasks if we learn rigorously and consistently to think not from the individual to the social, but from the social to the individual level, not from the part to the whole, but from the whole to the part.

The prevailing mode of thinking I have elsewhere called highly involved.[11] By that I mean that many sociologists are not yet able to perform that mental operation which in terms of our universe is usually linked with the name of Copernicus. They see society from their narrower location within a social system. And they form theories in which, as in everybody's immediate experience of oneself, this individual here and now is the starting point, the beginning, as it were, of all considerations. Individuals are, as it were, the starting point. It is, as I have said, a vista comparable to the geocentric vista, *a personality centred vista.* As such, like the geocentric experience, it will always be with us. We cannot help seeing the world in the immediacy of our experience, from inside out, and conceiving of everybody else as someone who also conceives the world, and as one of its segments human society with oneself, an individual at its centre. It requires what I have called an act of detachment, a mental operation at the root of the natural no less than the social sciences, to put oneself mentally, as it were, in the position of an outside observer. It was this act which enabled people gradually to conceive of themselves and of their planet not as the centre but as part of the universe. Thus seen from outside, we can see the pattern which individuals form with each other. From that vista it is no longer this or that individual, a plurality of initially isolated individuals, from which one has to ascend, as it were, to the structure, to the social system which they form with each other. Seen from outside, one sees first the pattern they form with each other, functions they

[11] 'Problems of involvement and detachment', British Journal of Sociology 7: 2 (1956), pp. 226–52. This essay, with others, later became part of the book Involvement and Detachment (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 8]).

perform for each other, the web of interdependencies by which they are linked to each other, and one descends from there to an understanding of the parts, of individuals within this structure. This one might call a *society-centred sociological theory*.

But such a theory does in no way imply that society, that the web of interdependencies or however one may call it, is *more important* than its individual parts, that in social policy more regard should be paid to one than to the other. In fact, I believe that we can conduct an effective social policy in terms of our aims only if we adjust our theoretical conceptions as nearly as possible to what we actually observe. Only then can we hope to take effective measures to attain our ends. If, on the other hand, we let our ends taint and distort our vista of what is, these ends themselves must remain unattainable.