

# СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ ТЕОРИЯ

## MULTI-PARADIGMATIC SOCIOLOGY: DEBATES PRESENT AND PERENNIAL\*

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**Abstract.** The multidimensional and rapid changes of contemporary societies provoke the need for a process-oriented and flexible sociology which is strong in explanatory terms. Instead, the general picture of present day international sociology is sobering. Divided into a number of streams, directions, theoretical and methodological orientations it can hardly produce cumulative scientific knowledge. This is the reason why observers define the current situation of sociology as pre-science according to the Kuhnian terminology. The usual stress on the multi-paradigmatic character of sociology only strengthens this theoretical and methodological deadlock. Is there a way to get out of it? The article offers a positive answer to the question. It is focused on the need to develop and apply a new paradigm of sociological theorizing and research. It is expected to meet strategic requirements. They include the correspondence to basic parameters of social reality, the expected epistemic and methodological efficiency and axiological link to practical action. After checking the potentials of major paradigmatic orientations in sociology the conclusion is that the core of the promising paradigmatic innovation could be a broadly defined concept of social interaction. It is intended to support the building and explanatory application of middle-range theories in all action spheres and at all micro-, mezzo- and macro-social structures and processes.

**Keywords:** sociological paradigms; social interaction paradigm; middle-range theories; quality of explanations; quality of expertise.

### The Confusing Problem Situation

At the first glance, sociology has its respected classics and recognized institutional positions. However, the scientific and practical prestige of the discipline has been in troubles for decades. The causes and reasons for this development are numerous. But from the point of view of the sociological knowledge the major reason is one and it is well known. In 1984 Niklas Luhmann put an alarming diagnosis on the critical situation: “Empirical

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research, though it has, on the whole, been successful in increasing knowledge, has not been able to produce a unified theory for the discipline” (Luhmann 1995 [1984]: xiv). The major reason why sociology still lacks a unified general theory is the absence of a widely shared disciplinary paradigm. It was Thomas S. Kuhn’s who made the crucial relevance of paradigms for the development of scientific disciplines subject of intensive debates. His multidimensional understanding of a scientific paradigm was summarized by himself in the second edition of his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1970 [1962]: 175) as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community”. The “community” should be understood as “scientific community”. The specification of “at a given point of time” might be added too. In various modifications the view is widespread that the large and growing plurality of disciplinary paradigms undermines the common basis of the sociological knowledge. More precisely, the view assumes that the rising number of diverse and incompatible paradigms hinders the adequate orientation and regulation of the sociological middle-range theories and the numerous explanatory models in the discipline.

In fact, in 1969 Walter Wallace presented 11 sociological paradigms (1969: 17-44) under the heading of “viewpoints”. Some fifty years later the articles included in Seth Abrutyn’s *Handbook of Contemporary Sociological Theory* contain a larger variety of sociological paradigms (Abrutyn 2016). They might be tentatively called structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenological sociology, neo-Marxism, modernization theory, structuralism, structuration theory, psychoanalytical theory, feminism, world system theory, social exchange theory, social networks theory, etc., etc. The paradigms co-exist peacefully as a rule but clashes between them are well known too (Bryman 2008). In both cases the plurality of paradigms is the major handicap facing the cumulative development of sociological knowledge. The question arises immediately: Is cumulative development of knowledge possible or even desirable in sociology which is widely regarded as a multi-paradigmatic discipline? Taking the proliferation of sociological paradigms into account, the proper answer seems to be clearly negative. The stress on paradigmatic pluralism can be easily presented as fostering of creativity and sound competition in science as well as toleration of freedom of sociological research and theorizing. The overwhelming agreement on this point would make any further debate superfluous.

However, the full acceptance of the multi-paradigmatic strategy for sociology is risky. Under the conditions of soft disciplinary cohesion all kind of intellectual nonsense imitating the terminology used in the sociological discourse might aspire for the status of an autonomous sociological paradigm.

This is not so difficult since sociology suffers deficits of recognized and respected conventions about the content and functions of theory, methodology, inter-subjective verification and falsification. The consequences of this situation for the discipline are destructive. The lack of widely followed disciplinary principles and standards concerning description, explanation and prognostication is a permanent hindrance to the development of a homogenous sociological tradition. The efforts of Talcott Parsons (1967 [1937]), George Ritzer (2001 [1981]), Niklas Luhmann (2012 [1997]) and others to overcome this handicap have brought about partial effects so far. The consequence is theoretical and methodological uncertainty. It negatively affects the trust in the discipline's relevance for the general cognitive development and for the management of social processes. This became obvious in the context of the (mis)management of the cross-border migration worldwide and in Europe in particular (Genov 2018: 145-208).

The confusing situation invites for corrections in all dimensions of causes, manifestations and consequences of constraints on the development of sociological knowledge. The task is complicated and sensitive for many professional sociologists. No doubt, the variety of sociological paradigms is largely due to the high complexity of social reality as the subject field of sociological knowledge first of all. However, the resistance of the followers of influential *and* peripheral sociological paradigms against paradigmatic syntheses is no less responsible for the current situation. The resistance takes its motivation and arguments from deeply rooted differences in the answers to strategic meta-theoretical questions: What is, what can or what should be the core of the sociological research interest — the individual with his/her status/role characteristics or society with its functionally differentiated subsystems? The actions of individuals, groups and organizations, or the social structures as objective outcomes and conditions of action? The integration of social systems, or their change?

These and many other dilemmas determine the uncertainty in the professional reactions to questions concerning the operation of the sociological theorizing and research: The focusing on which ends and means of sociological studies and in which way would facilitate or hinder the quality of the studies? Should they pay special attention to the understanding of meanings shared by the acting individuals in order to explain the social situation? Or, should they focus the attention on relatively stable economic, political and cultural structures in order to explain the orientations, decisions and actions of individuals and collectives? Should the major goal of sociological theorizing and research be the enlightenment of individuals and collectives about the aims and means of their own activities? Or, should the focus of the activities of sociologists fall on their contribution to the management of social processes?

Similar alternatives are everyday concerns in practical discourses too. However, in the practical activities the pressures of circumstances require rational coordination and cooperation of individuals and collectives usually interested in the solution of the common technological or organizational problems. According to optimistic visions the confrontation of strategies for theory building and empirical research in sociology could be overcome by comparing the efficiency of research approaches and their results in the resolution of cognitive and practical problems too. This option for paradigmatic coordination and integration has been taken under various circumstances. But the efforts to materialize it regularly clash with theoretical and methodological differences as well as with diverging institutional or personal interests. In most cases influential sociologists are not interested in the intellectual integration of the discipline. The efforts to establish and apply strict procedures of inter-subjective proof of the efficiency of paradigms meet resistance or counteractions because of considerations for establishing and maintaining professional profile, institutional impact, market realization and prestige. In addition, paradigmatic differences are often used for cutting rational discussions, argumentation and search for transparency by entrenchment of the followers of paradigms in self-sufficient isolation. Therefore, Douglas Porpora (2015: 5) has some good reasons for his smashing diagnosis of the current situation in sociology: "...in contrast with physics, sociology cannot at all be described as a mature science. In Kuhnian terms, sociology is not even a science. It is instead what Kuhn called pre-science. The appropriate activity in pre-science, Kuhn suggested, was not normal science but continued work toward paradigmatic consensus".

Under these conditions "doing sociology" is and will remain be guided by proclivity to develop and use diverging and confronting paradigms. The specifics of the sociological knowledge may play their role in supporting the reproduction of these contradictions. That is why the examples of consequently and systematically carried out verifications and falsifications of paradigmatic propositions are rarities in sociology. One may identify cases of inter-subjective proof of results of some theoretical and empirical sociological studies, but such procedures are being applied with substantial difficulties. The arguments "for" and "against" theoretical and methodological paradigmatic preferences, research techniques and procedures, results and conclusions are discursive as a rule and only exceptionally refer to repeated and verifiable research results (Hassard and Cox 2013).

It is not the complexity and changeability of social reality alone which makes the paradigmatic homogenization and cumulative development of sociological knowledge so difficult and nearly impossible. The acquisition, processing and use of sociological knowledge are deeply embedded in social reality. Its changes

are the driving force of the appearance of new paradigms, or for the re-orientation of old preferences towards sociological paradigms. Michel Wieviorka is certainly correct by arguing that “the grand paradigms on which researchers rely in social science can only be dissociated with difficulty from the context in which or for which they are worked out” (2012: 13-14). Most probably he is also correct in raising the point that in a long-term perspective sociological knowledge cannot be cumulative because of the changes in the subject matter of the sociological studies and the related changes in the content, organization and style of the sociological knowledge. But he continues the argumentation in the direction that there are no serious reasons not to recognize cumulative development of sociological knowledge in relatively short-term perspective, for instance during the recent half a century (Wieviorka 2012: 14–15).

### **Are There Prospects for a Constructive Change?**

The continuing theoretical and methodological differentiation and the ensuing paradigmatic polarizations in sociology are not without alternatives. The unique complexity of the subject matter of sociological studies and the strategic confrontations within the sociological community notwithstanding, a tendency towards theoretical, methodological and institutional integration of sociology is manifest as well (L'Abate 2012). This tendency is getting more and more discernable in the context of the rapidly growing relevance of global problems and processes which require integration of knowledge, political will and resources for their study and management. The integration is difficult and slow, but there are options for accelerating it. The building and use of an integrative conceptual framework in the paradigmatic fundament of the sociological knowledge in close connection with the related development of middle-range theories and theoretical models opens promising prospects in this respect. These parallel developments are supported by the intensive search for commensurability of the approaches and the outcomes of theoretical and empirical sociological studies. This is the way for improving their cognitive quality and practical relevance.

The crucial task in the development of an integrative sociological paradigm has to be approached and resolved at the level of the general theory in sociology (Genov 1989; Porpora 2015). The stress on process-oriented general theorizing could provide conditions for analytical differentiation and integration of concepts, approaches and methods at the level of the middle-range theories, theoretical models and empirical studies on social structures and processes. Such a balanced development of paradigmatic general sociological theory with middle-range theories and theoretical models is the promising way for qualitative and cumulative advancements of sociological knowledge. Its consolidation can

contribute to the enlightenment of broad audiences as well as to the effective use of sociological knowledge in the development and application of social technologies.

The strategy for resolving the outlined problem situation is presented below in three steps. *First*, arguments are developed for the selection of a conceptual core of the integrative sociological paradigm. On the basis of this decision the analytical concepts are identified which are needed for cognitive reproduction of fragments of social reality in theoretical models. In the optimal cases this cognitive development comes about with the parallel formulation of hypotheses. Some of them might be inductive while other deductive to the extreme. This is the stage of the *analytical description*. *Second*, the analysis of determination trajectories of stability and change of social structures by using the selected central concepts and by testing of hypotheses contribute to the building of explanatory models. Their commensurability for further integration is carried out in conceptual integration and proof of options for theory building. This is the stage of the *categorical systematization*. *Third*, the functioning of the selected sociological paradigm orients and regulates the inclusion of explanatory models into middle-range theories. The conditional designation of this stage is *theoretical concretization*.

The so outlined sequence of steps follows the usual procedures for building scientific theories. The procedures might follow either inductive or deductive strategies or combinations of both. The process normally includes rational and non-rational elements in the context of discovery or in the use of intuition in the selection of theoretical or methodological preferences. The rationalized reconstruction of the process starts with the definition of paradigmatic conditions for descriptions and explanations and their integration in theoretical models. The next step consists in the efforts to carry out partial explanations and in the elaboration on theoretical models. Their integration in theoretical systems and validation in verification and falsification procedures follow. This movement of analysis towards more and more complex explanatory frameworks is usually called movement from theoretical abstractness towards theoretical concreteness.

This type of procedures doesn't come about in research fields or in scientific disciplines where the critical mass of explanatory models has not been accumulated yet, where the attempts at synthesizing the models in theoretical systems are rare or not existent. This stage is over in the development of sociological knowledge. At present sociology can demonstrate a repertoire of empirically tested explanatory models and well organized theoretical knowledge about social stratification and social organizations, influence and power, identity, status and roles of individuals and about a lot of other structures and processes

in social reality (Abrutyn 2016: 2). The empirical experience and the conceptual frameworks of the discipline facilitate the transition to systematic theoretical concretizations (full-fledged sociological theories). The clarity about the content and the logic of these processes notwithstanding, the debates on their paradigmatic conditions, aims, means and course are high on the agenda of the debates in sociology (Outhwaite 2015: 616–619; Hammersley 2015: 632–638).

In some of the discussions the maturity of sociological knowledge and thus the need to systematically develop its paradigmatic foundations is radically questioned. In fact, if the quality of the cognitive content and organization of descriptions and explanations in present-day sociology really correspond to the stage of pre-science according to Kuhn's conceptualizations, then the debates on the comparison and evaluation of sociological paradigms are futile activities. The objectivity in the assessment of the methodological and theoretical status of the contemporary world sociology dictates a different standpoint, however. For decades already the crucial issue in the development of sociological knowledge has been not the availability or absence of cognitive conditions for building paradigms but the issue about the efficiency of the available and newly introduced sociological paradigms for guiding and regulating sociological theorizing and empirical research in action fields like the organization studies (Burrell and Morgan 2005 [1979]). The productive discussions are not focused on the issue if sociological paradigms are necessary or possible, but on their identification, comparison, selection and use. In other words, the key issue in the debates concerns the content and intellectual style of the *laying the foundations* of the sociological theories. The urgent task includes the specification of conceptual frameworks intended to orient and regulate the sociological studies and the development of sociological knowledge.

This rational laying the foundation of sociological theorizing and research is necessary for the development of sociology as a systematic science. This result could be best achieved in case that the criteria and procedure for development and testing of the conceptual frameworks needed for the purpose would be formulated by using categories which are widely known and basically acceptable in the sociological community. It is exactly the orientation towards a conceptually organized and empirically testable basic knowledge which distinguishes sociology from the social-philosophical visions or the revelations of future-tellers and prophets. The ambition to develop tested and reliable theoretical knowledge provokes strong expectations and requirements concerning the quality of the sociological diagnoses and prognostications. High expectations and requirements concern the contribution of advanced sociological theorizing and research to the efficiency of the management of social processes as well. Therefore, clear statements are needed about the potentials and limitations of the sociological

knowledge and about its practical use under given conditions of functioning of production and services.

Two clarifications are needed at this point of analysis and argumentation. The task for laying the foundations of sociological studies is not guided by the ambition to build their “last” foundations for eternity. This is obvious because of the historical embeddedness of the sociological studies in their permanently changing subject matter. As seen from another angle, the task for laying the foundations of the sociological studies does not mean that the “upper stores” of the sociological theory should be constructed in the future. To the contrary, the very task of laying the foundations of a scientific discipline comes to the fore in the moment, when substantial results in its development have been already achieved, including results at the high level of abstraction and generalization. In this sense the situation with the building up of scientific knowledge and particularly of sociological theory is paradoxically different than the usual practices in the construction of buildings. The conceptual foundations of scientific disciplines are being built up later than the “upper stores” of particular theories and explanatory models. Once this has happened, the task of the paradigmatic foundations of the disciplinary knowledge becomes crucially important but might be manifest in different ways. Another major task concerns the need for clear distinction and coordination of paradigms, middle-range theories, theoretical models and their mutual impacts. A related issue becomes manifest too, namely the issue concerning the efficient use of the results of sociological studies in the steering of social processes. The direct relevance of both tasks and the outcomes of the efforts to resolve them might increase or decrease due to changes in social life and/or in cognitive configurations (Schluchter 2015).

These meta-theoretical considerations receive concrete meaning and relevance in the context of current sociology. Contrary to the assessment of Porpora it is more realistic to say that the situation of the discipline cannot be so easily described as “pre-science”. It is closer to the parameters of an under-developed “normal science” according to the conceptual model of Thomas S. Kuhn. This situation has been observed and analyzed for longer than fifty years already. If this period would be followed by some kind of a disciplinary scientific revolution – this is impossible to tell now. It is still not clear if in the multi-paradigmatic science of sociology scientific revolutions in the sense of Kuhn could happen indeed. The history of sociological ideas and disciplinary communities tells that the predominant pattern of changes in sociology is not the radical replacement of paradigms but the co-habitation of old and new paradigms together with re-invention of old ideas and practices. Against the background of this uncertain experience one circumstance is entirely clear. It



is obvious that the discipline currently needs stimuli coming from new fundamental ideas and most probably from new sociological paradigm or paradigms. One may expect that the refreshment of debates on the paradigmatic foundations of the discipline could have invigorating impacts on the development and application of sociological middle-range theories and theoretical models.

### Requirements to the Paradigmatic Framework

In order to attain this desirable effect one has to answer a complex question in advance. What requirements the new foundation of sociological knowledge (new paradigm) should fulfill in order to be efficient? The brief answer reads that the new paradigmatic framework should possess substantial informational, heuristic and theoretically-organizing capacities. This might be achieved by building up the desirable conceptual framework in correspondence with a view to a series of *ontological, epistemic, methodological and axiological conditions* (Burrell and Morgan 2005 [1979]: 9).

A core requirement for the efficiency of the foundations of sociological knowledge is its close linkage with the social reality. This means that the qualities of the concepts which are used for laying the foundations of sociological studies should be predominantly *ontologically guided* by the specifics of the subject matter of sociological studies and less by conceptual constructivism in sociological theory building. In the same time the framework should be developed at a high level of generalization in order to be efficient in guiding research under a large variety of social conditions and modalities of research aims and means. The paradigmatic framework is expected to be built up from abstracted analytical concepts which follow the logic of the “analytical realism“ (Parsons 1970: 830) by avoiding the concreteness falsely included in many versions of general sociological theory. The framework should take into account the controversies in the self-development (auto-poesis according to Luhmann) of social systems.

By following this strategy of theory building the conceptual framework intended to lay the foundations of sociological studies should guide them to an adequate and balanced theoretical reproduction of stability and change, subjectivity and objectivity, continuity and discontinuity, of the interplay of local and universal characteristics of social reality, etc. Such an effect could be achieved if the disciplinary paradigm of sociology would be synthesized mostly from substantive (not meta-theoretical) results of sociological studies. The results should come from studies carried out with a variety of cognitive aims, by using sound philosophical arguments, methodological tools and precise operation in empirical research and theorizing.

The rich informational background of the desirable disciplinary paradigm is a basic condition for its *epistemic efficiency* in the search for validated new

sociological knowledge. This means that the disciplinary paradigm will be expected to support the construction, selection and proof of theoretical models meeting the requirements of truth as defined in the discipline at a given point of time. The next step is the inclusion of commensurable explanatory models into the systematic explanatory frameworks of theories. The proof of theories is double sided. It concerns their correspondence to the studied segment of social reality first of all. Another proof for epistemological efficiency concerns the degree of internal coherence and cohesion of the propositions in the theory.

The *methodological requirements* towards the fundamental conceptual framework in sociology concerns its objectivity, simplicity, clarity, logical consistency, heuristic capacity, quality of guiding micro-, mezzo- and macro-sociological studies as well as the quality of interplay of theoretical and empirical approaches to social reality, etc. These mechanisms are needed for performing the reduction of social complexity in the sociological explanations. The methodological efficiency or lack of efficiency in laying the foundations of sociological studies can be best evaluated with a view to the quality of the content and the systematic of the cognitive outcomes of the studies. One of the tasks of the paradigmatic methodology is the cleaning of the outcomes from the intensively practiced re-labeling of well-known ideas in paradigmatic pseudo-innovations.

The *axiological requirements* concern the capacities of the disciplinary paradigm to facilitate the proper understanding of the type and intensity of moral and political biases of actors involved in sociological studies as well as the desirable, possible or real impact of the studies on social processes. The resolution of these tasks is possible by orientation and organization of empirical and theoretical research along the understanding that there are always impacts of social stimuli and constraints on the orientation and implementation of research procedures. As seen from the point of view of the outcomes there are intended and unintended practical consequences of the sociological research work. Therefore, the disciplinary paradigm is expected to facilitate the concentration of research on social problems by using the adequate theories and methodological tools. The other side of the axiological relevance or irrelevance of the disciplinary paradigm concerns its capacity to facilitate the orientation and implementation of sociological studies in accordance with the need to efficiently resolve social problems (Bruun 2007).

The quality of the coping with these requirements determines the capacity of the suggested or practiced paradigm to contribute to the integration of the discipline (Noguera 2010: 40). The achievement of this desirable effect very much depends on the selection of the starting point for laying the foundation and development of sociological knowledge. The efforts for resolving the task

lead to the search for a social phenomenon which is to the highest degree common for the variety of action spheres, for specific social situations and for their historical content. The phenomenon would be expected to contain the major characteristics of social life in a condensed form. Under these conditions the concept might be expected to offer opportunities for empirical operationalization and theoretical generalization in sociological studies on structures and processes at micro-, mezzo- and macro-social level. The analysis of ideas from the sociological classics, studies on the dynamics of social structures and processes and generalizations from sociological research lead to the idea, that the requirements might be best met by the well elaborated *generalized concept of social interaction*. Examples of dealing with modalities of this paradigm and its use should be critically considered.

### The Paradigmatic Core of Sociological Knowledge

The strategy for developing a synergetic general sociological theory on the basis of elaborated social interaction paradigm meets the resistance of historically oriented sociological methodology. Its guiding ideas have been developed by Max Weber in details. It orients the sociological studies towards explanation of singular historical situations by means of *understanding* the motivation of the individuals interacting in the situation (Diehl and McFarland 2010). Whatever the causes and reasons for the propagation and use of this methodological idea, it puts barriers in front of the rational development of testable sociological knowledge. If sociology as theoretical *and* empirical discipline should be distinguishable from the historiographical narrative, its theoretical ambition has to be strong. It is a basic strategy of studies in theoretical sociology to systematically develop conceptual frameworks which make repeatable, theoretically well founded and empirically testable explanations possible. In order to achieve this aim it is not enough that the conceptual framework of sociology includes predominantly constructs like Weber's *ideal types* or *sensitizing concepts* stimulating explanations via the techniques of understanding as suggested by Anthony Giddens. Other types of concepts are needed, which contain knowledge about relatively stable and universal characteristics of social reality. Max Weber is firm in his conviction that this type of sociological knowledge is not possible since such characteristics do not exist in social reality indeed (Weber 1968: 68-69). In this way he rejects the very perspective for development and application of a general sociological theory and the cumulative development of sociological knowledge.

If the assumption about the existence of long-term and universal characteristics of social reality were correct, how to achieve and permanently improve the desirable systematization of the knowledge about these

characteristics? Four worldly known and respected cases show how different the approach and the results of the attempts at resolving this task might be.

### *Symbolic interactionism*

The synthesis of ideas of the European neo-kantianism with ideas of the American pragmatism is the background of George Herbert Mead's efforts to lay the foundations of social psychology. The outcomes of this basically philosophical project were later interpreted by Herbert Blumer and others as laying the foundations of the sociological symbolic interactionism. Moreover, Blumer had the ambition to develop and apply these foundations as efficient sociological paradigm resolving the dilemmas of sociological research and theorizing (Blumer 2005 [1969]). Later intensive efforts were invested in the project to turn symbolic interactionism into leading sociological paradigm under the headings of communicative action (Habermas 1981). In fact, there were some good reasons for these efforts. Mead's studies on the evolutionary transition from the animals' communication by means of gestures towards human communication by means of "meaningful symbols" became attractive for sociologists due to the discovered universal patterns of sociality.

According to Mead symbols are created and used in the course of the mutual understanding of the roles of participants in bilateral communications. Mead's formulation is clear: "It is the social process of influencing others in a social act and then taking the attitude of the others aroused by the stimulus, and then reacting in turn to this response, which constitutes a self" (Mead 2015 [1934]: 171). This is the definition of constructing the individual self by means of social interactions understood as exchange of symbols between individuals. This is the key point taken by Herbert Blumer's in his transformation of Mead's ideas into the sociological paradigm of symbolic interactionism. It is presented by Blumer in three points. *First*, people act with a view to living and non-living objects in accordance with the meanings people attached to them. *Second*, the meanings are product of social interactions. *Third*, the meanings are permanently changing in the course of the everyday symbolically regulated activities (Blumer 2005 [1969]: 2).

The above points correspond to basic ideas of Mead. However, Blumer intentionally forgets another key point in Mead's theory, namely that "the whole (society) is prior to the part (the individual), not the part to the whole; and the part is explained in terms of the whole, not the whole in terms of the part or parts" (Mead 2015 [1934]: 7). In a sharp contrast to the holist explanatory orientation of Mead Blumer represents an individualist explanatory strategy: "The point of view of symbolic interactionism is that large-scale organization has to be seen, studied and explained in terms of the process of interpretation

engaged in by the acting participants as they handle the situations at their respective positions in the organization” (Blumer 2005 [1969]: 58). In other words, Blumer suggests dissolving social aggregates in the sociological explanations to *the subjective symbolic definitions of the situation*, which *individuals* give to the components of the situation in their problem-solving activities. But a lot of social problems are of material nature and cannot be resolved by symbolic operations at all. Moreover, Mead used to repeat the point that the objective and material human body is an important component of social interactions. This is another strong argument supporting the conclusion that Blumer’s proposal for taking his symbolic interactionism as candidate for integrating sociological paradigm cannot be persuasive.

Therefore, Blumer strategically over-estimates the symbolic components of social interaction and under-estimates the relevance of the matter-energy components of the interaction. The attention of the followers of the paradigm of symbolic interactionism is focused on the analysis of singular interactions while the stable structural determinants of the individual thinking and behavior in the interactions remain in the periphery of the research interest. In this way the very possibility to carry out reliable sociological explanations and prognostication is questioned. The same holds true for the reserves of the followers of symbolic interactionism towards the elaboration and application of universalized tools for the study of problem situations. This reservation makes symbolic interactionism prone to methodological relativism. Therefore, the generalizing assessment of Hans Joas of the intellectual relevance of the works of George Herbert Mead in the sense that “nobody has as profoundly and consistently inaugurated an understanding of the inherent sociality of human action as George Herbert Mead did” (Joas 2015: XI–XII) is probably correct. However, a full-fledged sociological paradigm cannot rely on such a narrow focus of the aims and means of sociological theorizing and research. Nevertheless, some studies guided by ideas of symbolic interactionism have contributed to the better understanding of micro-social processes. This concerns studies on interactions in specific small groups, of appearance and change of symbols in everyday interactions, the relevance of symbolic representations in decision-making, etc. (Jacobsen 2017).

### *Social interaction as exchange*

Contrary to Mead, George Caspar Homans starts his proposal for his version of interactionism in sociology with the objective parameters of social interaction understood as “an exchange of goods, material and non-material” between human individuals (Homans 1958: 597). Homans’ next step in the carrying out his explanatory strategy with the selection of propositions which follow the

logical model of laws in the sciences of nature. He believes that combinations of these law-like propositions could provide the framework for building explanatory hypotheses which can be empirically tested in the same way like the laws in the natural sciences. The content of his law-like propositions is borrowed from the behaviorist psychology and from the utilitarian vision about economic behavior. The focus is on the alternative of benefit or harm which is related to the alternative pleasure-suffering in ethical terms. Consequently, the backbone of Homans' sociological theory consists of propositions which concern success, stimulus, deprivation-satiation, value and rationality of the action of individuals. The content and the style of the law-like propositions might be well illustrated by Homans' *success proposition* which is typical for the intentions and intellectual style of his social exchange theory:

*The success proposition:* "For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action" (Homans 1974 [1961]: 16).

In this way a radical reduction of the sociological explanations to the stimulus-reaction pattern of behaviorist individual-psychological explanations comes about. This explanatory conceptual framework does not include traditional sociological concepts of social aggregates like society, organization, class, or sophisticated considerations about mental processes. Instead, the behaviorist explanatory framework is focused on the objective exchange of rewards and punishments between individuals. This theoretical and methodological orientation has its far reaching implications. The major one is the decision that the explanation of the structure, functioning and change of social aggregations can only be achieved by reference to regularities of the behavior of individuals in "face-to-face" social interactions.

The severe problems facing this paradigm are caused by its rather simplified and one-sided approach to the subject matter of sociological theorizing and research. In social reality every interaction between individuals takes place in the context of established and changing basic structures of production and distribution, of power relations and value-normative regulation, of widely shared patterns of thinking and behavior as well as of social organization. Individuals are bearers of these social structures but most often as participants in the activity of collective actors like formal organizations. Every attempt at explaining social interactions by underestimating the impact of social structures and collective social actors on the interactions of individuals is doomed to inadequacy and failure. The key reason is that the mutual influence of the basic social structures and collective actors brings about the social order in a given social space and time. That is why the preferences, decisions and actions of individuals are not a matter of unlimited free choice but they are facilitated and constrained by the

combined influence of basic structures and organizational environments in the given social space and time.

The reduction of social interaction to the parameters of individuals' and of sociology to behaviorist individual psychology is essentially linked to Homans' assumption about historically stable human nature. It is supposed to dominate the processes in small groups as major factor of orientation, decisions and actions as well as of stability and change there. This is an unrealistic assumption since studies in historical sociology have already accumulated respectable massive of knowledge about historical changeability of human nature (Ormrod 2016). The result is that the paradigm of interactionism suggested by Homans is methodologically biased by behaviorist individualism and anti-historical assumptions to the extent that it cannot be a conceptual framework allowing balanced sociological studies of micro-, mezzo- and macro-social structures and processes or of stability and change in social reality.

Despite the weaknesses of the sociological paradigm proposed by Homans there are continuing attempts at adapting its basic ideas to the needs of multidimensional sociological studies. The unmistakably clear intention of Homans to reduce the explanation of social structures and processes to structures and processes in the interaction between individuals notwithstanding, his ideas were applied in efforts to explain intergroup dynamics and even the functioning and change of societies. For this purpose the social exchange theory received interpretations in which groups, organizations and societies are regarded as social actors not much different from individuals (Treviño 2016). However, this is a theoretical development, which radically deviates from Homans' paradigm concerning the ends and means of sociological theorizing and research.

#### *Society as Framework of Functional Interaction*

In their specific ways both George Herbert Mead and George Caspar Homans initiated the development and use of two micro-social paradigms for orientation and regulation of sociological studies. The intellectual heritage of Talcott Parsons is usually regarded as a radical alternative to such micro-social sociological paradigms. There is some truth in this believe since in his latest publications Parsons really developed and applied a conceptual framework of society for the orientation and methodological control on the sociological theorizing and research (Parsons 1990 [1966]; 1971). He applied this macro-social paradigm in his studies on modernization first of all. However, it would be correct to discuss this development in the context of his changing understanding of the ends and means of the sociological studies in the course of his long professional career.

Parsons' started the efforts at laying the foundations of social science studies with his first monograph on the structure of social action (Parsons 1967 [1937]). Some ideas of the monograph guided his first and only empirical project on the dynamics of the relationships between physician and patient. The project could not be finished but the intellectual impact of some of its ideas remained long lasting because of the typology of basic characteristics of micro-social interaction. Generations of American students of sociology used to start their studies by listening to lectures on the famous typology of *pattern variables* of Parsons. Nearly in the style of Homans he formulated the pairs of alternative concepts of *affectivity vs. affective neutrality*, *self-orientation vs. collective orientation*, *universalism vs. particularism*, *achievement vs. ascription* and *specificity vs. diffuseness*.

This conceptual framework turned out to be not universal enough to satisfy Parsons' ambitions to lay the foundations of sociological knowledge. He tried to resolve the issue by re-working the pattern variables in the direction of a better integrated concept of social action. However, in the meantime he got involved in the debates on the emerging cybernetics. This new theoretical interest led him to the idea that the concept of social action could be incorporated into the theory of self-regulating social systems. The logical next step became the synthesis of the concepts of social action and social system into the theoretical scheme and research strategy of the structural functionalism. The scheme of five loosely connected conceptual pairs did not satisfy the requirements of the new intellectual developments in the study of living systems. The changing intellectual context facilitated the appearance and the variety of applications of the famous conceptual scheme A-G-I-L consisting of the functions adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency. The scheme is specified as follows: "the process of interaction takes place within a framework of a common cultural code: a conversation requires a common code" (Parsons 1970: 29). Following the logic of this definition Parsons ascribes a central relevance in the interaction to the function latency (pattern maintenance) because of its crucial role in the cybernetic self-regulation of social action and social systems.

The theoretical implications of the so presented conceptual evolution are numerous. Parsons believes that each social system like religious community, university, society, etc. interacts with its internal and external environments by fulfilling the fundamental requirements of the analytical scheme of four functions A-G-I-L. In the case of society as the most self-sufficient social system the macro-social interactions are performed by four subsystems of the societal system. The economy is related to the function of *adaptation* (A). The subsystem of societal steering (politics) performs the function goal *achievement* (G). The subsystem of the societal community takes the function of *integration* (I). The



subsystem of culture performs the function of preservation of value-normative patterns (L). In his attempts at explaining evolutionary changes of societies the major subsystem is persistently the preservation of value-normative patterns (Parsons 1990 [1966]: 2, Table 2).

This universalized interpretation of social interaction refers to all micro-, mezzo- and macro-social structural levels and opens promising prospects for full-scale sociological descriptions and explanations of social stability and change. Thus Parsons developed a sociological interaction paradigm which seems to be much more elaborated and productive than the micro-social paradigms developed by Mead, Homans and the followers of the sociological paradigms of symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory. Parsons is fully aware of the advantages of his understanding of social interaction. If the properties of interaction were derivable from properties of the acting units, social systems would be epiphenomenal, as affirmed by individualistic social theories. The position of Parsons is radically different and more respectable since he follows Durkheim's idea that society is a 'sui generis reality' (Parsons 1971:7).

As seen from another vantage point, one should not forget that according to Parsons the cybernetic regulation of interactions in society and other social systems is dominated by the institutionalized cultural patterns corresponding to the dominant values. This is a theoretical and methodological position which tends to underestimate the determining capacities of the material structures of the technological and social division of labor or of political power in the regulation and control of social interaction as well as on the integration and change of social systems.

### *The paradigm of world system*

In a sharp difference to Parsons' universalized schemes of analytical concepts used for description and explanation of societal structures and change in any historical space and time, Immanuel Wallerstein laid the stress on historically specified studies. He defined his methodological approach as "embedded in the history of the modern world system" (Wallerstein 2004: 1). His approach is based on a broad theoretical and practical experience with the rapidly expanding technological and social division of labor since the beginnings of European industrialization. This analyses of historical processes motivated Wallerstein to focus his studies on the appearance, reproduction and change of the modern social order. In his efforts to resolve the task he vehemently argues against the modernization theories which typically take society as paradigmatic unit of sociological studies. Instead, he preferred to take *the interactions at the structural level of the world systems* as the most fundamental unit of sociological analysis.

Stressing the multifactorial character of historical processes Wallerstein defines the world system in interaction terms but differently than Mead, Homans and Parsons: “a world-system is a social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence. Its life is made up of the conflicting forces which hold it together by tension and tear it apart as each group seeks eternally to remold it to its advantage. It has the characteristics of an organism, in that it has a lifespan over which its characteristics change in some respects and remain stable in others” (Wallerstein 1974: 347).

The analytical precision of the definition might be questioned. Are there typical factors whose interaction brings about, reproduce and change each world system? Are there key concepts which are necessary and sufficient for defining all versions of world systems? The search for answers should take into account the strategy for development of the world systems theory. Wallerstein assumes that the way this could or should be done is marked by innovative interpretations of large-scale historical processes. Guided by this historically-oriented methodological approach, he identified a sequence of three world systems in modern history dominated by the Netherlands, Great Britain and the United States respectively. According to Wallerstein, these three countries and their close allies have been in the core of their respective world systems, with the rest of the world divided into semi-periphery and periphery. The interactions in the world systems include flows of capital, advanced technology and know-how from the core to the periphery and flows of raw materials and cheap labor force in the opposite direction.

The scientific community has recognized Wallerstein's contribution for convincingly establishing the truth about the global inequality and exploitation. However, in the present context the particular relevance of Wallerstein's strategy of sociological studies mostly stems from the attempts at qualifying his historical analyses as an effort to establish a new sociological paradigm (Goldfrank 2000). Giovanni Arrighi is straitforward in this respect: “world-systems analysis as a distinctive sociological paradigm emerged at least 15 years before the use of globalization as a signifier...” (Arrighi 2005: 33). If so, what are or might be the major parameters of this paradigm? It takes the interactions in the division of labor, political conflicts, interplay between economy and politics and the cultural dynamics of secularization in the worldwide context as constitutive for the subject matter of sociology. In this respect Wallerstein became one of first sociologists who conceptually captured the profound macro-social changes which were called “globalization” some later. *Second*, according to Wallerstein his sociological paradigm is not universalistic but applies to the historical period since the sixteenth century till the present day. *Third*, his assumption is that the world systems have the common characteristic of being

structured and function by means of interactions between societies belonging to the core, semi-periphery and periphery of the respective world system. *Fourth*, the above interactions are believed to produce and reproduce domestic and international inequalities. They bring about, maintain and reproduce social conflicts at various structural levels. *Fifth*, contrary to the majority of candidates for the status of sociological paradigm the world systems theorizing and research has the potential of being practically relevant (Wallerstein, Aquirre Rojas and Lemert 2012).

The realistic assessment of the potentials of Wallerstein's world systems theory to become one of the leading paradigms of sociological theorizing and empirical research includes some critical comments too. His approach to social reality is based on assumptions which represent a step backwards from Parsons' achievements in developing and applying universalized social science concepts. He strongly emphasizes the historical interpretations thus making systematic synchronic and diachronic comparisons strategically rather difficult, if not impossible. The lesson to learn is that the study of *different* historical constellations in Wallerstein's *methodological globalism* should be consistently enriched by systematic explanations, guided by an analytical conceptual framework.

Another striking issue in this context concerns the strong linkage of Wallerstein's analysis and conclusions to historical developments in Europe after the sixteenth century. Following his own clarifications this means that his analysis only makes sense with the rise of the first world society under the dominance of the Netherlands. This decision immediately provokes questions: Should the followers of the world systems paradigm declare the studies on primitive, ancient or early medieval societies as scientifically illegitimate or just as informational noise in social science?

Besides this fundamental problem concerning the historical dimension of the sociological theorizing another crucial structural issue faces Wallerstein's theory of social systems. Should the sociological community embrace a paradigm which is exclusively focused on macro-social structures, functioning and patterns of change? The issue is of the same nature like this which concerns the exclusively micro-sociological paradigms of the symbolic interactionism and the social exchange theory but concerns the opposite side of the typology of social structures and processes.

Many ideas of Wallerstein concerning structures, functions and change of world systems seem intriguing and deserve attention. However, he hardly offers any valuable conceptual scheme for studies of micro- and mezzo-social relations and processes. He offers no methodological solution concerning the links and interactions between these types of social structures or about their mutual

influences. Therefore, one may see the ideas of Wallerstein about the study of world systems as similarly one-sided like key ideas of symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory but with over-stress on the macro-social structures and processes.

### **Conclusions**

The efforts to put sociological diagnosis on the present day local, national, macro-regional and global social situation should be based on profound knowledge about historical events and processes. However, to achieve this aim the dynamic, complex and complicated historical processes and the contemporary social reality have to be conceptually “sliced” in order to make meaningful descriptions, explanations and prognostications of the present-day social structures, functions and processes at the three basic structural levels of social life. Fundamental conceptual frameworks are needed which could make this possible.

The critical comparative overviews on four respectable efforts to lay the foundations of sociological theorizing and research by using different concepts of social interaction leads to some strategic conclusions. The first one is that the style and the content of the efforts to resolve the issue provide the clear evidence that the four respected sociologists understood the relevance of the work on sociological paradigms pretty well. However, the analysis identified one-sidedness of key components of their theoretical and methodological efforts. The problematic outcomes of these important works make it clear that new efforts should be invested for resolving the strategic task. The efforts will have to be focused on the question about the specifics of the concept or concepts which are expected to serve as core of the general sociological theory. Should this be Meads ideas about the construction and change of social life by means of the creation, stabilization, change and exchange of symbols by individuals? Or, should the behaviorist ideas of Homans be preferred for laying the foundations of sociological theorizing and research? Is the final stage of the several attempts by Parsons at resolving the issue by developing and applying the paradigm of societally centered functionalist evolutionism a better candidate for the purpose? Last but not least, should recent developments in sociological theorizing and research on globalization orient their preferences to the world systems approach of Wallerstein?

This is a series of questions concerning a small sample of candidates for the most ambitious task in the building of sociological theory by focusing on the key concept of social interaction. In reality, the list of such attempts is much longer and respectable. It includes Luhmann’s ideas about the meaningful construction of social life by using the system of world society as the final

reference of communication (Luhmann 1995 [1984]). Anthony Giddens might insist on focusing sociological theorizing and research on the concept of structuration understood as interaction (Giddens 1984). The breakthroughs in linguistics offer fruitful perspectives for using the analysis of the speech act for laying the conceptual foundation of sociology on the basis of interactionism combined with ideas of structural functionalism (Habermas 1981). There are suggestions to focus sociological theorizing and research on the vision of a cosmopolitan world (Beck 2014), etc.

The background idea guiding the analysis and argumentation in this article is that the best candidate seems to be the broad, well differentiated and generalized concept of social interaction of individual and collective actors at the micro-, mezzo- and macro-social level of the organization of social life.

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