THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL THEORY
DILEMMAS, STRATEGIES AND PROJECTS

The Structure of Social Theory

Dilemmas, strategies and projects

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Preface

This book is the culmination of a co-operative venture which began some years ago when a group of teachers who had the responsibility for teaching theoretical sociology – from introductory to post-graduate levels – in the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester collectively accepted that the ‘crisis’ of sociology heralded by Alvin Gouldner in 1971 had arrived. As teachers of theory we found ourselves at the sharp end, attempting to pass on to students a body of knowledge, the basic assumptions of which were under attack from a variety of directions and whose contents were undergoing radical changes, seemingly from month to month. It was becoming increasingly difficult to ‘keep up’ with this burgeoning and critical literature and still retain a secure framework of issues which made sense of the discipline for students. The danger was to bombard students with critique and counter-critique to the point of self-destruct: a disillusioning process for those who came to sociology looking for solid achievement and knowledge. In short, a major and traditional function of theory courses, to provide a sense of disciplinary unity, was no longer being fulfilled.

In order to cope with these problems that we commonly faced, and in order to sustain some continuity of approach at each level of teaching, we agreed collectively to rework the courses. Unfortunately, our own views of what constituted sociology were very nearly as disparate as the competing perspectives and schools that we confronted in our attempts to ‘make sense’ of the literature, and we soon discovered that before we could collectively respond to the problems of teaching we had to reach some agreements about the nature of social theorising ourselves. Out of these dilemmas and goals the basic ideas and perspectives for the book emerged. Our

discussions led us to seek for conditions of unity underlying the divisions and fragmentation which appeared to characterise the enterprise of sociology.

The text which follows seeks primarily to clarify the nature of these disputes, by providing a systematic framework which understands both present and past controversies as a persisting *dialogue* between four strategies of theorising. We do not provide a history of social theory, though the text does provide the basis for such a project. Rather it is an enquiry into the 'systematics' or structure of theorising about the social, using a number of classical and modern sociological writings as vehicles for the illustration of what we take to be the perennial dilemmas of theory – what is the nature of social reality and how can we best gain knowledge of it? Finally, we also, in our concluding chapter, set out the conditions under which disputes over these questions might be resolved: why we should prefer one theoretical perspective to another, and how we might evaluate those attempts at synthesis which recognise a disciplinary unity in sociology.

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