Author's Preface

Sociology, since its origins in the nineteenth century, has endeavored to make modern society intelligible as a historical unit. For this purpose, it has elaborated numerous concepts and sometimes even theories. By the time of the French Revolution, if not earlier, interpretations of society were all suspected of being covertly ideological. Social theories seemed by nature controversial. As a consequence, it became desirable to limit whenever possible the subjectivity of evaluations and the arbitrariness of the way analytical tools were deployed. Painstakingly chosen concepts and testable theories were meant to subserve these goals. Frequently, as in the Hegelian tradition, perceived contradictions in society were simply incorporated wholesale into social theories. Often, options were held open, without being meaningfully interrelated—thus, Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, individualism and collectivism, theories of action and theories of structure, to name but a few. This phase in the development of sociology has now drawn to a close. It has exhausted its resources. Further work in the same vein will merely reiterate previous attempts, with predictable futility. Yet, the initial task of social theory remains.

The theory of action systems developed by Talcott Parsons is still the only concerted effort to move beyond this original phase. By integrating the two concepts "action" and "system," Parsons' approach supersedes all endeavors to choose, from a fundamental opposition, only one of the contrasting concepts as the starting point for social theory—for example, action and not system, structure and not process. The way Parsons worked out his theory, however,

remains ultimately unsatisfying: His theory is overly concerned with its own architecture. And it is not flexible enough, despite its receptivity to contemporary theoretical innovations, to incorporate a wide variety of concepts and the empirical information that has been gathered in connection with them. Parsons' attempt was grandiose, but it underestimated the problems of a theoretical synthesis as well as the difficulties of developing a convincing interpretation of modern society.

Thanks to Parsons, we can now see more clearly what the dimensions of these problems are. The theoretical traditions of sociology remain diverse—but that is the least of our troubles. In the vast interdisciplinary marketplace, we now find increasingly various and enticing offers. Compared with what was available to Parsons, we now have a surfeit of possibilities that no one can thoroughly exploit: cybernetics, systems theory, information theory, as well as highly subtle concepts such as self-referentiality, complexity and meaning.

The list of such theoretical tools could be extended. However, when one attempts to integrate them within a professional sociological context, one encounters major difficulties. First of all, they require us to think at an extraordinarily high level of abstraction. And they compel us to use formulations that point in several directions at once without our always being able immediately to communicate why and in what respect. Moreover, if we seriously intend to take up the existing possibilities for a theoretical synthesis, we shall be forced to use language that is much more technical and rarefied than that of ordinary (or historically concrete) interpretations of modern society. A theory set up in a more complex way, of course, enables us to form a more complex picture of society. That means, for example, that it uncovers more positive and more negative characteristics of modern society than conservatively or progressively engaged theories normally do. We can then play with such discoveries, in order to confound right-wing and left-wing theorists who pretend to have all the answers in advance. During the last ten years, in Europe at least, most positions in social theory have become so stereotyped that it has been a simple matter to recognize slogans and to set off protests by remote control.

Unfortunately, this has not proved to be a very beneficial pro-

cedure. Modern society, moreover, is now confronted with novel challenges that must be articulated and brought clearly into public consciousness—even (and especially) when we do not yet know what their solutions might be. Modern society was already so far advanced by the beginning of the eighteenth century that it began to respond to its own structures. In the eighteenth century itself this reaction took the form of social theories that registered the peculiarities of each of society's most important functional domains. There were theories that focused respectively on politics, on the economy, on science, and on education. In the nineteenth century, by contrast, attention was shifted to the long-term consequences of the new type of society. Modern society's impact on social and human relations assumed special importance, but the situation had fundamentally altered. It had become evident that the evolution of society might threaten basic preconditions for human survival. Thus, it also became clear that the question of how much time we have available must begin to play a critical role in our thinking about society. To the extent that demands grow, not only resources but time too becomes scarce.

Under these theoretical and social conditions it is difficult to satisfy the requirements of "grand theory," of which Hegel provided the last distinguished example. Possibilities for theory formation have become richer, the social need for interpretations has become more urgent, and time has become scarce. In light of this situation, it seems to me advisable, even necessary, to renounce the artificial and aesthetically pleasing form of a closed theory in order to take advantage of the many suggestions offered by today's theoretical discussions. We must, above all, resist the fatal slide toward specialization—even if this means that the background and the conceptual framework of our own arguments sometimes remain obscure to those not specialized in them.

In recent years, I have worked on two theoretical projects that cross-fertilize one another. On the one hand, I have pursued a general theory of social systems. This theory begins with the Parsonian concept of "double contingency" and makes use of suggestions from general systems theory, the theory of self-referential relations and communications theory. Here, the concepts of "complexity" and "meaning" provide starting points for functional anal-

yses. On the other hand, I have worked extensively on a theory of modern society. We can no longer define society by giving primacy to one of its functional domains. It cannot be depicted as civil society, as capitalist/socialist society, or as a scientific-technocratic system. We must replace such interpretations by a definition of society that refers to social differentiation. Modern society, unlike all earlier societies, is a functionally differentiated system. Its analysis thus requires a detailed study of each of its single functional subsystems. Society can no longer be grasped from a single dominant viewpoint. Instead, its dynamic is clarified through the fact that functional systems for politics, the economy, science, law, education, religion, family, etc. have become relatively autonomous and now mutually furnish environments for one another.

The essays translated in this volume concentrate on the theory of modern society. Suggestions derived from a much more abstract conceptual framework are only introduced indirectly. The highly abstract language employed even here as well as the wealth and difficulty of the concepts used is only a hint of what would really be required. The German language seems to lend itself more readily than English to the dense compression of thoughts and to expressing in a single word more meanings than are subsequently put to use in the context of the entire sentence. This provides possibilities for playfully introducing provisos, afterthoughts, ironies and provocations, and also for conveying references that cannot easily be incorporated into the linear structure of the sentence. Such nuances, of course, are exceedingly difficult to translate. Correspondingly difficult, in fact, was the task of putting these essays into readable English. Stephen Holmes and Charles Larmore have assumed this burden with sensitivity and intelligence. Indeed, it is thanks to them that the English language has finally accommodated the original texts. For their effort and for their cooperative collegiality, I would like to thank them warmly.

Bielefeld, May 1980 NIKLAS LUHMANN