

3 The individualistic paradigm

In sociology, understood as a population science, an ‘individualistic’ rather than a holistic paradigm of inquiry is required because of the high degree of variability existing at the individual level, and, further, because individual action, while subject to sociocultural conditioning and constraints, has to be accorded causal primacy in human social life, on account of the degree of autonomy that it retains.

Boudon (1990; see also 1987) provides a clear statement in principle of the case for an individualistic, as opposed to a holistic, paradigm of inquiry in sociology, acknowledging its origins in the work of Max Weber (see esp. 1922/1968: ch. 1). Boudon emphasises that the individualistic paradigm does not involve ‘an atomistic view of societies’, nor a denial of the *sui generis* reality of sociocultural phenomena and of the ways in which they may motivate, constrain or otherwise pattern individual action (1990: 57). In other words, there is no claim of *ontological* individualism: that is, no claim that only individuals *exist* (or, to quote Mrs Thatcher, that ‘there is no such thing as society’). Rather, the argument is for *methodological* individualism (Popper, 1945: vol. 2, ch. 14; 1957: ch. IV): that is, for the position that sociocultural phenomena have themselves to be accounted for, in the last analysis, in terms of individual action. While it may be entirely reasonable for the purposes of many sociological inquiries to take certain such phenomena as givens, rather than as the explananda of immediate interest, it still remains the case that if they were to be explained, this could only be by reference to individual action and to its present or past, intended or unintended, direct or indirect consequences (see Hedström and Swedberg, 1998a; Elster, 2007: ch. 1).¹

¹ An analogous situation, pointed out to me by David Cox, is that in many investigations in physics it is not necessary to go down to the quantum level – although this

The principle of methodological individualism is one that might well be taken as 'trivially true' (Elster, 1989: 13). Difficulty in accepting it would in fact appear to arise either because of a failure to see that methodological individualism does not entail ontological individualism or because of an insistence that individual action is always influenced by the social conditions under which it occurs – a claim that could also be regarded as trivially true, but without being in any way damaging to methodological individualism.² The crucial issue to be addressed is that of where else in human social life actual causal capacity could lie if not with the action of individuals, under whatever conditions it may be taken. The main, if not the only, form of sociological theory that has sought to dispense with this capacity is that of functionalism, following the logic of explanation set out in Chapter 2, in which individual action is in effect reduced to epiphenomenal, socioculturally programmed behaviour. But, as was further observed, while functionalism represents the main theoretical resource of the holistic paradigm, it can, in its actual application, claim very little in the way of explanatory success.

What follows from acceptance of the individualistic paradigm is then that norms and their embodiment in cultural traditions or social institutions cannot serve as a satisfactory 'bottom line' in sociological explanations (see further Boudon, 2003a). Such explanations have to be grounded in accounts of individual action; and where the influence of social norms is invoked, the further questions must always be raised of why it is *these* norms, rather than others, that are in place, and of why individuals conform with them – insofar as they do – rather than deviating from them or openly challenging them. No explanatory logic can be thought adequate that requires that the actions

level would indeed have to be resorted to if a 'rock bottom' explanation of all the phenomena involved were to be required.

² It is also possible that methodological individualism may be opposed because it is taken to imply some commitment to individualism as an economic or political creed. But as Weber (1922/1968: 18) himself observed, 'It is a tremendous misunderstanding to think that an "individualistic" method should involve what is in any conceivable sense an individualistic system of values'.

of individuals should, as it were, follow from some pre-ordained script.³

However, for present purposes, what needs to be more clearly brought out are the *sources* of the autonomy in human action that necessitates and underwrites the individualistic paradigm. The evolved capacity of human individuals, as earlier noted, to conceive of ends that are their own, as distinct from those of the collectivities to which they belong, is one such source. But an essential complement has also to be recognised insofar as the link between ends and action is concerned: that is, humans' further evolved capacity for what might be called *informed choice*. This capacity derives from humans' distinctive mental ability – in which language would appear to have a crucial role – to *prefigure* actions that they might take in pursuit of their ends, given the information they have about the situations in which they find themselves. Other animals, even primates, appear to live in an eternal present or to be able to 'plan ahead' in only quite limited ways: chimpanzees cannot learn to tend fires. In contrast, humans, one might say, can readily think in the future perfect tense. They can mentally rehearse not just one but a number of different courses of action that they might follow in a certain situation, and are in turn in a position to assess and evaluate in advance the likely consequences of acting in one way rather than another (see e.g. Dennett, 1995: ch. 13; Dunbar, 2000, 2004: 64–9, 104–7; Gärdenfors, 2006: chs 2–5). And what may of course be at issue here is setting the advantages offered, in relation to given ends, by some form of normatively deviant or perhaps normatively innovative action against the disadvantages of engaging in it.⁴

³ In this respect, Boudon (1990: 41) illuminatingly contrasts his own position with that of his compatriot, Pierre Bourdieu, who, through his application – or, it could be held, misapplication – of the Thomist notion of *habitus*, in effect supposes an over-socialised conception of the individual actor yet more extreme than that against which, in a mainly American context, Wrong and Homans earlier objected. See further Boudon (2003b: 140–8).

⁴ The work in cognitive and evolutionary psychology referred to in the sources cited helps remedy a major weakness in the critiques of 'over-socialised' conceptions of

This capacity for informed choice can then be seen as in turn implying some form of rationality in action: that is, that which operates when individuals actually make choices among the possibilities open to them. As Runciman (1998: 15) has put it, '... there is every reason to suppose that the human mind has been programmed by natural selection to calculate the trade-off between the costs and the benefits of one course of action rather than another'.⁵ And, as will later be seen, it is on an appreciation of this 'rationality of everyday life' that the individualistic paradigm primarily draws in seeking to account for the individual action and interaction which it treats as being – in the short term or the long, intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly – the generative force of sociocultural phenomena.

Exactly how the rationality of everyday life operates is the subject of much current research and debate. On one important point, though, a consensus could be said to exist. It would be generally accepted, on empirical grounds, that the kind of rationality

the human actor advanced by Wrong and Homans – that is, that the psychological foundations of these critiques were questionable as well as being quite contradictory, Wrong appealing to a Freudian theory of instincts and Homans to a rather crude behaviourism. Sociologists have often reacted in a very negative way to positions taken up by evolutionary psychologists in particular – as, for example, to that of Tooby and Cosmides (1992) in their attack on 'the standard social science model' of the human individual as implying a 'blank slate' (see also Pinker, 2002). This attack can in fact be understood as one focused specifically on the psychological assumptions underlying the holistic paradigm and, on this interpretation, is well-conceived. But a problem arises from the authors' failure then to make the distinction between ontological and methodological individualism. A commitment to the latter in no way entails underwriting their very unfortunate claim that 'what mostly remains, once you have removed from the human world everything internal to individuals, is the air between them' (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992: 47; see further Goldthorpe, 2007: vol. 1, 180–3).

⁵ Interestingly, Dunbar (2004: 64–6) suggests that the highly developed theory of mind that underlies human ultra-sociality may be an emergent property of this more basic capacity for informed choice in that the kind of reasoning that the latter entails could provide the platform for the understanding of other minds: 'I use my experience of my own mental processes to imagine how someone else's mind might work.' This suggestion is in line with well-known arguments in both philosophy and anthropology that it is the idea of rationality that provides the essential *passé partout* into other minds and in turn into other cultures (see e.g. Hollis, 1987: ch. 1).

in question is clearly different from that typically assumed in mainstream economics – the social science within which an individualistic paradigm of inquiry has hitherto been most dominant. That is to say, it is not a ‘demonic’ or ‘hyper’ rationality that in effect requires actors to possess unlimited information and calculating power.⁶ Rather, some form of subjective or bounded rationality is envisaged that aims at good enough, or ‘satisficing’, rather than optimising, outcomes (Simon, 1982, 1983) and that can operate on the basis of only quite limited information and calculation alike, and under conditions that are in any event often characterised by a high degree of uncertainty.

Versions of such rationality that can be regarded as to a large extent complementary have been outlined from both psychological (e.g. Gigerenzer and Selten, 1999; Augier and March, 2004; Gigerenzer, 2008) and sociological (e.g. Boudon, 1996, 2003a; Blossfeld and Prein, 1998; Goldthorpe, 2007: vol. 1, chs 6–8) standpoints. In the former case, the emphasis is on the procedural, ‘inside-the-skin’ aspects of everyday rationality: for example, on individuals’ use in decision-making processes of ‘fast and frugal’ heuristics – ones that can be applied quickly and with relatively little information but that have been found to give generally positive outcomes in particular situations or, that is, in the environments in which they have evolved.⁷ In the

⁶ ‘Demonic’ refers here to the demon envisaged by Laplace (1814/1951) whose intelligence transcends all informational and calculating constraints and for whom nothing is uncertain and the future is as apparent as the past. Economists sometimes claim that much theoretical work has in fact been carried out on information costs and limits on calculation and on their consequences. But how far this does then feed into the treatment of decision-making in applied economics research may be questioned. For example, consider the following statement made in a paper on parental decision-making in regard to the financial support to be given to children’s education: ‘With smoothly functioning capital markets, parents equate the market interest rate on borrowing with the present value of the marginal return to investing in offspring’ (Blanden et al., 2010: p. 30). They do, do they?

⁷ It is important to distinguish the body of psychological research referred to here from that of the ‘heuristics and biases’ programme associated with Kahneman and Tversky (see e.g. Kahneman, 2011). The emphasis in the latter is on how and why individuals’ choices and actions often violate established principles of logic and

latter case, the emphasis is on situational aspects *per se*: that is, on the way in which individuals can be understood as acting, if not optimally from a 'demonic' standpoint, then still appropriately for the attainment of their ends – for 'good reasons' (Boudon, 2003a) – once features of the conditions under which they are required to act, such as resource, informational or time constraints, are taken into account.

In this body of work, it should be emphasised, it is fully recognised that informed, subjectively rational choice may itself often lead to conformity with established norms and practices. For example, in many situations 'Do what the others do' may indeed serve as a good fast and frugal heuristic (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999; see also Richerson and Boyd, 2005: 119–26) – one that saves on the costs of individual experimentation and learning and that, for so long as it helps individuals in pursuing their ends, may be adopted as a matter, more or less, of habit. And it is further recognised that norms, whether informal or institutionalised, may be quite rationally accepted and followed: for example, as a means of overcoming both relatively simple co-ordination problems (in Britain, drive on the left – almost everywhere else, on the right) and, if with some amount of free-riding, more difficult 'public goods' problems (see Ostrom, 1990, 2000). However, what is questioned (e.g. Edgerton, 1992; Boyd and Richerson, 1999) is the supposition that prevailing norms are always and necessarily 'adaptive'. Thus, where previously stable situations are disrupted or quite new situations arise, the 'Do what the others do' heuristic and unreflective and unconditional norm-following may appear increasingly ineffective as regards individuals' attainment of their ends (Laland, 1999). And what is then all-important is that the

probability – with the normative superiority of these principles being taken as given. In contrast, in the work of Gigerenzer and his associates especially, the idea of 'content-blind' norms of rationality is questioned, and the emphasis is on how fast and frugal heuristics can, under conditions to which they are adapted, match or even outdo demonic rationality in helping actors to achieve what they would themselves regard as positive outcomes (see further Gigerenzer, 2008: ch. 1; Berg and Gigerenzer, 2010).

individuals concerned have the cognitive resources to respond by conceiving of alternative courses of action, including perhaps ones that are of a normatively deviant or innovative kind, and by making informed choices among them.

In sum, attempts at providing a basis for the individualistic paradigm in sociology at the level of action entail a rejection of *Homo economicus*, driven by a demonic rationality, in favour of an understanding of the actor more securely grounded in the nature of *Homo sapiens sapiens* and guided by what Gigerenzer (2008) has called 'rationality for mortals'. Nonetheless, these attempts still result in an understanding of the actor that is very different from, and far more developed than, that found within the holistic paradigm. Rather than individuals being treated as to a large degree the creatures of the socio-cultural entities within which they are born and live – in the extreme as sociocultural puppets – their capacities for envisaging their own ends and for choosing, in some sense rationally, among different possible means of pursuing them are underlined. It is these capacities that endow individuals with a significant degree of autonomy from their sociocultural conditioning and in virtue of which the individualistic paradigm is required and validated.

Moreover, in this perspective, one further significant advantage of the individualistic paradigm becomes apparent: it allows, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, for a better appreciation of the nature of *constraints on* individual action. Within the holistic paradigm, the focus is on normative constraints. However, since it is also supposed that, through processes of enculturation and socialisation, norms that are in various ways institutionalised tend also to be internalised in individual personalities, the distinction between constraint and choice in individual action becomes blurred, if not lost. Action is in effect reduced to normatively shaped social behaviour. It was in fact such a reduction that prompted the old joke, directed against the work of Parsons and usually attributed to the economist James Duesenberry, that, while economics is all about choices, sociology is all about why there are no choices to be made.

In contrast, within the individualistic paradigm the possibility is readily accommodated that social norms may be subjectively experienced *as* constraints: that is, as imposing external limitations on individuals' action that are not grounded in beliefs and values in which they themselves share. And, further, it becomes easier to see that to centre attention on normative constraints on action is in any event seriously limiting. Other constraints exist, of at least comparable importance, that are of a *non*-normative kind: that is, what David Lockwood, in an early critique of Parsons, labelled as 'factual' constraints (Lockwood, 1956; see further Lockwood, 1992: 93–7 esp.). These are constraints that do not depend on any commonality in beliefs and values but simply express brute inequalities among individuals and groups in their command over resources – economic, political and other – and thus in their social advantage and power. In this way, individuals' opportunities for action, or, that is, the range of choices realistically open to them, are systematically and often extremely differentiated.

From this point of view, it is then scarcely surprising that the treatment of structured social inequalities in resources – or, in other words, of social stratification – has always constituted a serious problem within the holistic paradigm: specifically, that of how social stratification should be reconciled with what is supposed about the internal homogeneity of the sociocultural entities that are taken as the units of analysis and about their degree of integration.⁸ From the

⁸ The most common approach to the problem, followed by Parsons (1940), among others (e.g. Davis and Moore, 1945), has been to treat social stratification as being itself normatively sanctioned and generally accepted as a necessary response to functional exigencies: that is, those of ensuring the allocation of the most able individuals to those roles most important for 'system maintenance' and of ensuring their motivation to perform at a high level in these roles. Such theories of social stratification have, however, been subjected to a wide range of both conceptually and empirically grounded critique (for an early example, see Tumin, 1953) and have by now little currency. An alternative approach characteristic of Marxist-inspired *fonctionnalisme noir*, as opposed to Parsons' *fonctionnalisme rose* – to take up Raymond Aron's nice distinction – has been to regard acceptance of social stratification as indicative of a social system, the integration and maintenance of which derive from the ideological, as well as economic and political, domination of inferior by superior classes.

standpoint of the individualistic paradigm, in contrast, social stratification and the operation of the non-normative constraints that follow from it present no difficulties. They are regarded as further major factors increasing the heterogeneity of human populations and creating variability in human social life – in this case, variability, one might say, in life-chances that is *prior to* variability in life-choices. And in this way, the need for sociology to be based – to return again to Mayr's distinction – on population thinking rather than on typological thinking is re-emphasised.

The argument of this chapter so far has been somewhat abstract, and in order to bring out more clearly what is entailed, it may be helpful in conclusion to provide some more concrete illustration of its central points. This can be done by reference to one of the most remarkable processes of social change that is evident in the contemporary Western world: that is, the quite rapid erosion, from the 1960s onwards, of beliefs, values and related social norms sanctioning marriage as the basis of sexual relationships and of child-bearing and child-rearing, and the corresponding increase in the numbers of individuals opting for non-marital cohabitation and family formation.

It may first of all be noted that analyses of this process (e.g. Nazio and Blossfeld, 2003; Nazio, 2008) show how it began with a relatively small increase in the numbers deviating from prevailing norms – but including, to use Merton's (1957: ch. IV) distinction, not only pragmatic 'innovators' but also 'rebels'; that is, individuals opposed to what they regarded as 'bourgeois conventions' and whose quite open entry into cohabitation would appear to have created a significant demonstration effect.

The diffusion of the practice then gathered pace as members of successive birth cohorts could not only observe more examples of cohabitation among their coevals but, further, became increasingly aware of the cost-benefit advantages that it could afford – even if still to some, declining, extent regarded as deviant – and especially so in a period in which economic opportunities and constraints were being substantially reshaped. Women's labour market opportunities were

widening, but many men and women alike were experiencing greater uncertainty in their early working lives (Blossfeld and Hofmeister, 2006; Blossfeld, Mills and Bernhardt, 2006). In these circumstances, entry into cohabitation was often found more attractive – as a matter, one could say, of informed choice – than the alternatives of either marrying or remaining unattached. Through cohabitation, long-term commitment could be delayed until some measure of worklife security had been achieved without incurring the costs of sexual isolation or promiscuity; and at the same time, the advantages of pooled resources and economies of scale in living together could be gained (Oppenheimer, 1994, 1997; Mills, Blossfeld and Klijsing, 2005; Bukodi, 2012).

Such analyses of the decline of marriage and the rise of cohabitation do then well illustrate the potential force of individual autonomy as against prevailing norms in response to changing conditions of action. In addition, though, they also serve to bring out one other point of relevance for present purposes. They show that when previously well-established social norms are undermined by processes of individuals' informed choice, neither movement towards some new normative consensus nor radical disorder necessarily follows.

In most societies, the increase in cohabitation would appear, so far at least, to have been associated simply with greater *normative diversity*. Previously dominant norms still retain some degree of influence alongside new norms. For example, those individuals who have a religious affiliation are more likely than those who do not to enter into marriage without prior cohabitation; and they are also more likely, if they do cohabit, to move to marriage at some point, as, for example, following the conception or birth of a child (Manting, 1996; Nazio, 2008). Thus, one might say, men and women have created greater degrees of freedom than before to realise the differing ideas and ideals that they would wish to live by; or, as Thornton, Axinn and Xie (2007: 73) have aptly put it, individuals 'have reclaimed from the community and larger social system control over crucial elements of the union-formation process'. Lesthaeghe (2010: 213–16) would in fact see the

increase in cohabitation as but one aspect of a 'second demographic transition', which involves 'an overhaul of the normative structure' regarding not only marriage and partnership but also sexual relations and child-bearing and -rearing, and in which autonomous 'individual choices' and 'utility' evaluations have prevailed over 'social group adherence'.⁹

However, changes of the kind in question need not be taken to imply that social order is then reduced, or at all events not in the sense of there being less regularity in social life. Individuals pursuing their own ends through processes of informed choice can also be a source of regularities at a population level: that is, through individuals making similar choices in similar situations (see Goldthorpe, 2007: vol. 1, ch. 6). And further in this regard, the effects of non-normative as well as of normative constraints in patterning social action can take on large importance. Thus, in the case of cohabitation, a major non-normative constraint on its diffusion is that imposed by the mundane matter of housing costs. For example, it has been shown (Nazio and Blossfeld, 2003; Nazio, 2008) that in countries such as Italy and Spain, where a shortage of low-cost housing exists, many young couples, especially in lower social strata, who would wish to cohabit are in fact prevented from so doing and are forced to stay in their family homes simply out of economic necessity.

High levels of belief and value consensus and of normative conformity should not then be regarded as the only sources of regularity in social life. At the same time, though, a further conclusion can be drawn from both the general argument of this chapter and the specific illustration of it that has been given, which has direct consequences for what is to follow.

⁹ I would, though, stress that one does not have to suppose, as Lesthaeghe would seem inclined to do, that what is entailed here is some unilinear and irreversible movement – as, say, from 'tradition' to 'modernity'. It is quite possible to envisage that, again under changing conditions, individual action might lead to the re-emergence of a situation of increased normative consensus and conformity.

Where individuals seek in informed ways to pursue their own ends under conditions created by possibly quite diverse normative commitments and also by non-normative constraints that limit possible choices in very varying degrees, the regularities in action and in its outcomes that emerge at a population level are likely to be generated in more complex ways than would be expected under holistic assumptions. And this fact has then direct implications for the difficulties involved, to revert to the discussion of Chapter 1, in making these regularities both visible and transparent. Where sociological analysis starts out from the idea of populations and subpopulations, rather than from that of sociocultural entities considered at more micro- or macro-levels, what must follow is an awareness of human society as being, so to speak, far more loosely textured than it would appear under the holistic paradigm, while at the same time having a far more intricate weave. And such an awareness in turn reinforces what was said at the end of Chapter 2 about the requirements that methods of data collection and analysis must meet if population regularities are to be adequately established and described, and is further relevant in determining the appropriate form of explanation for these regularities.

The issues that arise here are ones that will be central to subsequent chapters, with the exception of Chapter 4, which represents a necessary excursus in order to make the case that it *is* probabilistic population regularities that constitute the proper explananda of sociology.