STUDYING COMMUNICATION
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

From the Theory of Action to the Analysis of Societies

Cyril LEMIEUX
It is not easy to foresee the theoretical orientations that research on issues related to communication will follow over the next few years. It does nevertheless seem easier to indicate which theoretical directions would be ideal for it to take. For those of us unable to predict the future, we still have the ability to attempt to shape it. That is the purpose of this article. It goes without saying that the possibilities that I will discuss here are by no means inevitable, and will not necessarily come into existence on their own. It is even possible that, due to their somewhat provocative nature, counter to current trends leading to further specialization in scientific research, they may be condemned to remain virtual.

COMMUNICATION: AN ATTRIBUTE OF HUMAN ACTIONS

The different nature of these research trajectories will be signalled through the way in which the subject of “communication” is defined here. I will refuse to see it as being a domain separate from social life. I will not liken it to a type of activity distinguished from others by virtue of a specific end purpose – communicating – nor to a specific facet of the reality organized around technological means of a certain type – media in the large sense. Instead, I will seek to acknowledge a dimension of action in communication. This definition could not be broader, as it suggests that, in the analysis of human behaviour, verbs such as “act” and “respond” are synonymous. In other words, all human actions are considered as fundamentally being of a return-action (or reciprocal action) type, generating a meaning that may be collectively validated (Lemieux, 2009: 97-125). This approach was initiated many years ago in the form of pragmatist philosophy and, more specifically, by George H. Mead (Mead, 1934; Joas, 1985; Quéré, 2004). Habermas proposed a reformulation of it that was particularly useful to social science researchers when, by contrasting work and interaction, he undertook the task of exploring the problem of what limits communication; in other words, that which restricts the mutual nature of actions (Habermas, 1973, 1984). As he pointed out, even though actions constitute interaction and therefore contain an irrevocable orientation toward reciprocity, they are nonetheless prone to being the cause of the
establishment of a state of asymmetry between the parties interacting. This is the case when one person treats the other like an object or a means of acting, according to the mechanisms specific to instrumental activities, which call for compliance with technical rules of which the ethical fairness is not currently the subject of discussion, and which lead to the creation of strategies to provoke and control others’ reactions.

Empirical sociology has shown that even those asymmetrical situations in which others are instrumentalized are still interactions, which in this case are marked by a relative indeterminacy and the potential reversibility of the relationship. Instrumentalization is manifest as a performance which must be actively sustained to be able to continue, and not as being definitively acquired or given a priori. In particular, this observation has shed new light on work situations in which the relations of domination and use that humans maintain with non-humans (objects, equipment, artefacts, animals, etc.) have come to be re-categorized as interactive processes which are therefore vulnerable to failure and the loss of control.\(^1\) Empirical studies have also shown that at the other end of Habermasian opposition, the situations that are the most akin to the “pure” type of mutual action are generally not exempt from the production of asymmetries, regardless of how minimal and transitory these may be. Therefore, in the background of collective action, in situations in which immediate reciprocity or detachment with respect to a third party prevail, it is often possible to observe gestures of restraint as well as attitudes of distrust or the initiation of dominating attitudes. Given that they marginally deform the reciprocity of the action or the establishment of collective distance to a lesser or a greater extent, these types of behavioural elements play a subversive role: in the eyes of those involved, they indicate the possibility of a potential restriction in their reciprocal communication or in their joint effort to distance themselves from one another (Lemieux, 2009: 155-176).

For all of these reasons, Habermas’ distinctions between work and interaction, instrumental activity and mutual exchange, as well as system and lived world, cannot be too clear cut. Moreover, it is also possible that the intention of Habermas himself, upon formulating them, was not to establish them as absolutes. Above all, their function was – and remains today – to permit the establishment, in the examination of communication phenomena, of a criterion to

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distinguish the normal from the pathological. This criterion is based on the fact that when an interaction becomes too asymmetrical, the possibility of reciprocity, *which is a promise contained within the very fact of interacting*, can no longer be maintained in the eyes of the actors. A criterion of this type is remarkable in that it is entirely internal to the phenomenon of human communication. Far from being a norm which is externally and arbitrarily imposed on a series of actions, it corresponds to their inherent condition of possibility: if they are not endowed with a minimal level of reciprocity and reversibility, actions effectively lose their entire interactive dimension and therefore cease to be identifiable as being actions in the strict sense. They become, on the contrary, the effect of a mechanical behaviour devoid of intentionality and meaning.

From this Habermasian perspective, the analysis of communication phenomena is defined as the study of both the interactive dimension of human actions and that which restricts this interactivity, namely the production of asymmetries among the interacting parties, which reduce the potential for reciprocity and reversibility in communication and which, in some cases, run the risk of annulling them altogether. In this type of approach, contrary to what is sometimes claimed, the attention granted to argumentative communication does not constitute the central analytical focus: the main focus is oriented far more towards the material and organizational devices that structure forms of interaction. It is primarily these devices which effectively make it possible to reduce the interactivity of communication without limiting its flow. In other words, it is these devices which permit asymmetries between actors to be established and reinforced without completely undermining the principle of the communication itself. It is furthermore also worth noting that physical and organizational devices are what generate inverse social effects in general. In other words, they increase the interactive – and potentially argumentative – nature of communication, and concomitantly decrease the production of asymmetries between actors.²

It goes without saying that defining communication as a constituent dimension of acting, rather than a specific domain of social life or a list of purposes, has consequences from the point of view of the organization of social science and the relationships between its disciplines. If we agree to see communication as a feature of human action, we are effectively led to assume that a science

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². See, for example, Livingstone, Lunt (1994), Muniesa (2013).
of communication can only be present under the guise of a science of actions (Quéré, 8). Nonetheless, it is evident that a scientific discipline focused on action has already been established: sociology 3; and it is not hard to see that the terms “anthropology” and “history” are also appropriate ways of naming it. 4 This leads us, in the context of this argument, to defend the idea according to which the unit formed by the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and history must be considered the scientific space of reference in the context of the analysis of communication phenomena. This position is inclined to distinguish between sociology (which forms a unit along with anthropology and history as a science of action) on the one hand and, on the other, related disciplines whose purpose is more partially defined, namely economics, linguistics, semiology, law, animal ethology, and cognitive sciences. While these disciplines do make significant contributions to the analysis of communication, I argue that it is sociology (once again, as understood in the broad sense) which provides the general context from which it is possible to group together and re-articulate these different contributions.

The main task of this article will be to attempt to indicate the desirable theoretical directions for communication research to follow over the next few years. This argument consists of three parts. Given the predominant place of sociology in the study of communicational phenomena, as I have just acknowledged, I first of all attempt to specify what may constitute a theoretical approach in this discipline and to indicate what distinguishes it from a theoretical approach in philosophy. This distinction leads us to the topic of empirical research methods, which have a key place in my analysis. It is from this specifically methodological approach that I will attempt, in the second part of the argument, to reconstruct the movement that was initiated around thirty years ago in France in particular, regarding sociological action theory and therefore communication analyses. Once I have reconstructed this

3. Just as this can be seen with particular clarity in the work of Max Weber, who calls sociology the “science that has the aim of understanding social activity through interpretation and therefore of causally explaining the progression of its effects” (Weber, 1995: 28). Durkheim, on the other hand, refers to sociology as the “science of institutions, their genesis, and their operation” (Durkheim, 1987:. XII). Nonetheless, by institutions, he refers to “all the beliefs and all the moments of conduct instituted by the collective” (ibid.); he therefore also places the central purpose of sociological research as being the activity of individuals (for example, observable behaviors and manifest beliefs).

4. Given the extent to which these three disciplines – sociology, anthropology, and history – benefit from an “epistemological indiscernibility” between one another (Passeron 2013). In the conclusion to the present article, I will attempt to draw practical conclusions from this.
movement and described its features, to conclude I will attempt to outline the extensions that may stem from it over the next few years as well as, and to identify those of them that seem the most desirable to us.

**DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT AND SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY**

The particularity of sociology – and this is what essentially distinguishes it from philosophy – is that its theoretical and conceptual frameworks are always strictly dependent on proof via empirical research, and that because of this, it is always dependent on the research methods used by researchers. In this respect, theoretical thought in sociology is possible only if it reflects on sociological research in terms of how it is carried out or should be carried out. This may appear to be reductive or provocative. It seems to put theoretical concerns on the same level as simple methodological problems. Nonetheless, it should not shock Durkheimian sociologists, who recognize themselves in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim, 1987), Weberians who have read “Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences” (Weber, 1995), interactionists who practice grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss, 1967), followers of Bourdieu who are the sworn opponents of the scholastic point of view (Bourdieu, 2000), and even less so ethnomethodologists, who are ready to seize on any abstract reflections as being the product of a practical activity (Garfinkel, 1967). Only certain philosophers and social theoreticians may be offended, namely those who believe theoretical thought to have a life independent of the practical conditions of its production. In that sense, their position is still very respectable, although it outlines, precisely, the Other of sociology. This is because sociology does not contain theories to put forward separately from the problem that consists in investigating empirical realities.

It is indisputable that the thoughts of philosophers and social theoreticians constitute a major source of stimulation for sociologists. This can easily be verified in terms of issues related to communication: above, I stated that the importance of pragmatist philosophical works as well as those of Jürgen Habermas, *inter alia*, must be acknowledged. However, given that this type of philosophical thought is not forged via the proof of empirical research, can it be used in sociology? Moreover, should we judge the statements that it produces as having an authority which is in principle superior to that which we are able to attribute to statements originating from sociological research processes themselves? To do so would mean running the risk of instituting a
sort of hierarchical relationship between philosophy, which would therefore be regarded as the only true producer of concepts and theories, and sociology, which would be relegated to the level of an ancillary discipline, dedicated to providing examples and proving in empirical terms an abstract thought, during the elaboration of which it is not consulted. It is worth noting that the integrationist viewpoint (Lemieux, 2012) of the relations between philosophy and sociology, according to which these two disciplines have no solution of epistemological continuity, is appropriate for this type of distribution of roles. In reality, given that it may lead to the belief that sociologists and philosophers are subject to the same constraints and are speaking from the same level, integrationism fails to defend sociology in its particular relationship with empirical research. Because of this, it tends to devalue the methodological requirements that form the basis of the scientific nature of this discipline and which constitute its practices in their supposed distance from those of philosophy. The model of philosophical theorization is therefore hegemonic, whereas the mode of production of theories that characterize sociology itself is no longer recognized as having any distinct value.

Only a conversionist position which consists of emphasizing the irreducible distinction between philosophy and sociology, so as to best ensure that the aims of the former are taken up from within the specific domain of the latter, and vice versa, seems able to ensure a respectful dialogue between the two disciplines in terms of their respective concerns (Lemieux, 2012; Calafat, Lavergne, Monnet, 2013). In this case, sociologists no longer find themselves in a position in which they are required to provide theories built upon the methods of philosophy, with concrete illustrations, or an empirical test. Moreover, they are no longer required to defend theories that go directly against those of philosophy. Rather, they find themselves in a position in which they are able to make use of another conception of that which constitutes theory. This alternative conception is based on the dynamics of their research on the social world and is affirmed via the dependence of this research on empirical investigation.

Those who advocate such a position must at least consent to addressing the issue of sociological theories of communication less in terms of abstract reflection than from the point of view of research methods. The first beneficial effect of a shift of this nature is to dispel the potential illusion that there exist types of sociology capable of being exempt from any theoretical aims. Paradoxically, this type of ultra-empiricist belief originates in the preference that it grants to the model of philosophical theorization. This is because in
reality, sociologists who claim to have an aversion to theory can but rely, in a sense, on that which constitutes an action or a society. While they may therefore be exempt from theory as conceived by philosophers, they are not exempt from the theory that is integrated into and supported by their research methods and data analyses in an eminently practical way.

PUTTING SOCIOLOGY BACK THE RIGHT WAY ROUND

To describe the way in which communications research has evolved since the birth of the publication *Réseaux*, Olivier Voïrol (in this issue) uses the idea of two successive “shifts”. According to him, the first of these, which started when the publication was in its very beginnings, progressively led us from a “paradigm of domination” toward a “paradigm of activity”. The second one, which is he claims is starting today, is supposedly taking us from the paradigm of activity towards certain preoccupations that characterize the paradigm of domination. Even though this prediction can be seen to be valid overall – at least for the French case –, the above arguments invite us to contemplate the transformation over the past thirty years from a different angle: that of the changes that have taken place in research practices and in the methodological choices of researchers.

To do so, it may be useful to distinguish between two types of task that sociology in its daily practice must accomplish: these can be called “technically primary” and “technically secondary” tasks (Lemieux, 2009). Technically primary tasks consist in describing and understanding the action. Their primary nature stems from the fact that, regardless of the topic that the researcher intends to study and the type of sociology that he or she plans to use, he or she is required to be able to correctly describe certain actions that have taken place and to reconstruct the meaning that they have for the actors behind them. “Able to” does not mean that the researcher is required to make permanent use of this type of comprehensive description, but rather that he or she must be able to make use of it when needed. Let us imagine that we wanted to analyze the operation of a socio-technical network (whether for international maritime traffic, satellite telephony, or Facebook) or the effect that the structuring of a social group or global society has on the likelihood of its members entering into communication with one another.⁵ If we use databases and statistical tools to do so, the statistical indicators cannot be conveniently manipulated

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⁵. An approach started, for example, with the work of Bidart, Degenn and, Grossetti (2011).
unless we have an idea, even if it is only an approximation, of the types of social action and context to which they pertain. The same applies if we work from a corpus of texts, image banks, audiovisual archives, or conversations on Internet forums. In all of these cases, the data cannot be properly used unless the researcher is capable of understanding and, if necessary, describing the actions for which these data constitute objectified traces.

This amounts to saying that having a theory of action – and therefore of communication – is, for all sociologists, a practical necessity. The less capable a researcher is of describing courses of action in a detailed, dynamic, and comprehensive way, the less he or she will be in a position to articulate a theory of the action strictly speaking and to concretely manage it. On the other hand, the more capable he or she is of going into detail and providing justification for the theory of action and communication, the more capable he or she will be of making use of the methodological means that will permit him or her to comprehensively describe courses of action, all the while respecting their interactive dynamic, regardless of the context. It is in this sense that defending the idea that the description and understanding of the action constitute the technically primary tasks of sociology amounts to affirming that the primary theoretical aim of sociology must be to forge a theory of action and communication that is relevant. To avoid any misunderstandings, I wish to specify that this theory can only be sociological. This is because in this case there is clearly no question of conceiving of the action as pertaining to a “purely” individual phenomenon: the requirement is to understand it in terms of an activity that is instituted or institutive, or, to once again make use of the expression I use above, to understand it in terms of a return-action which generates a meaning that can be collectively validated. At the same time, this means that the communication in which an actor engages in a certain situation and with a certain entity, whether human or non-human, never involves only that entity and the actor him- or herself, but instead also always involves the horizon of a community which is virtually placed in a position to guarantee the meaning of the situation. Making use of a belief of this type is a sine qua non condition for being permitted to speak of a sociological theory of action and communication, as opposed to behaviouralist and cognitivist approaches originating in the life sciences (Quéré, 2001).

6. This consequence must be accepted if, at the least, as I suggest in the introduction to my argument, communication is acknowledged as a property of any action.
7. Therefore, the tendency will be to substitute it by a theory of social structuring or societal structuring, and to conceive of the plan of action and communication as being deductible from this.
It would nevertheless be a mistake to believe that a theory of situated action and communication, even when it satisfies the requirements of sociology, can constitute the theoretical aim of this discipline on its own. To think this would be to claim, on the level of method, that the description and understanding of courses of action are sufficient to comprise the sociological enterprise. These tasks, regardless of how decisive they are, must be recognized not as being sufficient in themselves but rather as being technically primary; in other words, as tasks that make it possible to carry out secondary tasks. Among secondary tasks are mainly explanation, forecasting, and criticism. These sociological tasks are technically secondary inasmuch as they become fully possible only if they have been preceded by technically primary tasks. Moreover, they become all the more relevant once technically primary tasks have been correctly accomplished.8

Often, that which compromises the accomplishment of primary tasks – in other words, which hinders the description and understanding of courses of action – is precisely the researcher’s haste to carry out secondary tasks. This is why it is common for researchers to attempt to provide an explanation beforehand when it would be better to do this at a later stage and to put more emphasis on description first. This is the case, for example, when the fact that a person abstains from speaking at a public gathering is immediately related to his or her primary socialization, which is conceived of as an explanation. The researcher then fails to see the point of attempting to describe in detail the physical and interactional support that this person made use of to act and make judgments at this gathering and, a fortiori, makes no effort to examine whether the person showed him- or herself as being capable of speaking in other public situations where the physical and interactional supports available were different. Likewise, people are often hasty to criticize, in cases where it would be better to take the time to develop a better understanding first. For example, rushing to denounce the domination that certain categories of actors exert over others, or the fact that certain populations cultivate beliefs that are considered to be outdated or backwards, quickly leads to the inability to take their justifications seriously and the inability to attempt to fully describe and understand their practical reasoning.9 Furthermore, it is

8. This position can be described as being Weberian. For Weber, understanding social activity through interpretation, as opposed to being considered an end in itself, is a means – and to tell the truth, the only means available to us – to be able to causally explain the deployment of this activity and its effects (Weber, 1995: 28).
9. For a critique of this trend, which is more widespread than it appears, see Lagrange (2012).
worth noting that a researcher’s predictive capabilities may significantly limit his or her interest in the description and understanding of that which takes place during a course of action. For example, the knowledge that a researcher has of the fact that a person without a post-secondary education is more likely to enjoy popular music than opera may cause him or her not to take the time to describe in detail what this person does in a situation in which he or she is effectively faced with listening to popular music or opera. This descriptive requirement would be even more likely to be overlooked if the person’s behaviour in the given situation were deemed to have confirmed the researcher’s prediction.

This is why researchers’ impatience to move on to the secondary tasks of sociology is regularly found to be the cause of their inability to correctly carry out primary tasks. This means that – and it seems important to insist on this point – in many cases sociological theories have a limiting effect in terms of the scholar’s research capabilities. However, this effect is certainly not inherent to them; it stems from the use that is made of the theories. This use can be said to be anti-scientific whenever the explanatory, predictive, and/or critical processes provided by certain theories are used for the purpose of prematurely concluding or for refraining from establishing the description and the understanding of social activities in context. Once again, we are faced with a practical difficulty that would most likely be less common if a philosophical interpretation of that which constitutes sociological theory were not so prevalent among sociologists – by that, I mean an interpretation unrelated to empirical research. It is the authority of this theoretician model that leads researchers to neglect the reality of the situations that they must describe and understand in exchange for the keys of analysis, which they believe provide them with a sociological understanding of these situations beforehand.

In this regard, the contribution of what Olivier Voirol calls the paradigm of activity has been to recall the essential nature – given that it is technically primary – of the description and understanding of the action, and once again to place this type of task at the heart of process of sociological research on reality. This explains why the sociological theories that originated from this paradigm of activity were all established in terms of theories of situated

10. See in particular Ackermann et al. (1985).
actions and communication,\(^{11}\) even though they were far from being only that. For their advocates, the main issue was to break with the prevalent trend in the early 1980s in social science, consisting in considering the action level as being a secondary phenomenon and therefore deductible from the analysis of social structures. Confronting this belief would require them to question the idea that researchers, so long as they are armed with sound theory, are always equipped with a principle of explanation for the plan of the action, and are therefore capable of successfully predicting the behaviours that will play out during it. In this sense, their goal was to put sociology back into its proper place, by stressing that technically primary tasks must come first, whereas technically secondary tasks must only be carried out second, or risk detracting from the justification and scientific nature of the analysis.

**REOPENING THE POSSIBILITY OF EXPLANATORY, PREDICTIVE, AND CRITICAL THEORIES**

If we were to level criticism at sociologists of the activity paradigm, it would clearly not be for having reaffirmed the sociological requirement of being able to describe and understand action in its indexicality and its particular communicational dynamics. Rather, it would be for having appeared, at times, to limit the aims of sociology to solely this approach, as if, in a certain sense, the supporters of this paradigm came to believe that establishing a theory of action constitutes the enterprise of sociology in itself. In other words, it is as if they convinced themselves of the superfluous and even harmful nature of technically secondary tasks. This temptation to limit sociology to the scope of its technically primary tasks is often advocated through the Wittgensteinian aphorism according to which “the very enterprise of an explanation is already a failure because one must only correctly gather what one knows and not add anything else” (Wittgenstein, 1982: 14). However, such a claim from an authority external to the field of sociological practice makes sense only from the position identified above under the name of integrationism. This is because, only when the division between philosophy and sociology is considered to be negligible, can the statements of a philosopher who never intended to be a sociologist, and who, *a fortiori*, never claimed to be one, be presented as the source of guidelines that are valuable for the practice of sociological research. Therefore, the question to be asked might simply be the following: why turn to philosophical authorities rather than

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\(^{11}\) See, for example, the texts grouped together in Quéré (1993).
sociological ones? Why not turn to Max Weber, for example, who so vigorously defended the idea of “comprehensive” sociology without, however, considering – on the contrary – that this defence required the renunciation of the explanatory aims and the “objectifying” science nature of sociology (Colliot-Thélène, 1992: 42-45)?

In reality, when a researcher succeeds – which is already very difficult – in describing a series of actions both precisely and comprehensively, the sociological reasoning that he or she has employed is only half of the work that has to be done. He or she must still attempt to render this series explainable, predictable, and eventually criticizable. The second “shift” mentioned by Olivier Voïrol seems to specifically correspond to the reassertion of this intention. In fact, that which had been emerging for some time among the sociologists vindicating the essential nature of technically primary tasks was no other than the task of fully re-incorporating, from this position, the technically secondary tasks of sociology. This consisted in “fully reincorporating them”, considering that the majority of them were never completely abandoned. On the theoretical level, this shift, which can more appropriately be described as an extension or a resumption, corresponded to pursuing the theory of action and communication until one obtained a theory of social structuring or even a theory of society and, in particular, a theory of modern capitalist society. This is done in full awareness that the more robust the theory of action that serves as the basis is, the more likely it is that the theory of social structuring or of the society that it allows people to create will be correct. Additionally, the belief is that these two theories do not maintain an external relationship with one another but rather an internal one, in which the second is defined as an extension of the first.\(^\text{12}\)

It is worth stressing the fact that this extension of a theory of action and communication into a theory of social structuring, of society, or even of modernity, is far from being self-evident, as it can very quickly lead to regression. This is the case when explanation, prediction, and criticism are surreptitiously placed at the forefront of research operations once again; or in other words,\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{12}\) It is worth considering that the theory of social structuring or the theory of society that is sought in this case is presented as a new aspect of the theory of action and communication previously available. There is a simple reason for this: this theory of action and communication was above all a sociological theory; in other words, it already incorporated, on the level of the action and communication in context, the fact that a society existed.
when the theory of action is once again relegated to a subordinate position, such that researchers come to believe that it is possible to deduce the level of action and communication from the level of social structures or the general features of the society studied. This regression is also a threat when empirical research no longer guides the analytical intent, and when the theory developed around modern societies produces an abstract and generalizing style of reasoning – which I am tempted to call “purely” theoretical –, thus distancing itself from the concrete problems faced by field researchers when carrying out empirical research.

This leads to the belief that, even though it is possible today to discern the desire once again to commit to technically secondary tasks, among certain sociologists who affirm the primacy of technically primary tasks, it is clear that this change will most likely concern only a small number of researchers in the future. As is the case today, it is very likely that in the future a large number of sociologists will continue to accept the idea that the level of action can be more or less deduced from social structures, and therefore that it must be given a status that is above all illustrative or epiphenomenal. It is also very likely that a certain number of the researchers who are not satisfied with this idea will continue to take solace in the opposite idea, according to which the theory of action and communication in context is sufficient for the enterprise of sociology. As for those researchers who do not find either one of these ideas adequate, and to make an effort to go from the primacy of the comprehensive description of the action to the execution of tasks consisting of explaining, predicting, and criticizing this action, they will most likely remain a minority, as they are today. However, this is only a prediction, and it is possible that it may not materialize.

Whether sociologists’ future position with regard to the shift that I have just described turns out to be a minority position or not, this is no reason not to attempt to specify more clearly what their methodological and theoretical approach should consist of. To start, we know that it is on the basis of a theory of action and communication that they will attempt to establish a theory of social structuring, a theory of society, or a theory of modernity. Moreover, we know that it will be issues related to the execution of empirical research that will serve to guide them in the elaboration of such a theory. Finally, we know that this theory will enable them to carry out the technically secondary tasks of explanation, prediction, and criticism in a much more complete and satisfactory way than they currently do.
This leads to an initial requirement: among other things, this theory will have to be explanatory. In other words, it must allow for the currently observable actions to be linked to a past state or, even better, to a process of transformation that has caused the change from a past state to the observed present state. This process of transformation may, for example, be that which caused the change from a specific state of the division of labour within the group or society studied, to the current state. For example, practices that can currently be observed among sports journalists could be clarified via a description of the social process that, three or four decades ago or even earlier, led to the accentuation of the division of labour between actors in the sporting world and journalists, as well as within each of these two groups. Alternatively, the transformation process reconstructed could be the process that caused the change from a certain state of a given socio-technical device to the current state. An example of this might be the actions and methods of communication currently found in the relationships between doctors and patients, which can be put into perspective through a description of the socio-technical process, several decades ago, which led to both of them having access, to very different degrees and in very different forms, to statistical information and methods of scientific proof.

There are two points that seem to be worth emphasizing regarding this explanatory capacity specific to the type of theories whose boundaries are described here. First of all, it is worth noting that to conserve the precedence given to the theory of the action, the explanations permitted by these theories must ensure that they do not imply that the actions studied can be deduced from historical transformation. In other words, they must not strip these actions of all forms of indeterminacy. They must allow them to be seen as a part of a transformation process that precedes and determines them, without, however, considering that this process as mechanical or absolute. Second, it is a general theory of social structuring, of society, or of modernity that must be sought and endowed with explanatory virtues. It is therefore necessary to attempt to produce statements capable of a certain degree of generality regarding the general movement outlined by the transformation processes at work in contemporary societies. In other words, it is necessary to adopt in one way or another that which the founding fathers of sociology – including Max Weber as well as Émile Durkheim – adopted entirely: a sociological

13. For more details, see Lemieux (2004).
14. For more details, see Epstein (1996).
theory of history or, at the least, of the general direction followed by modern capitalist societies.\(^{15}\)

This theory, the profile of which I am describing here, must not be solely explanatory: it must also be a predictive theory. In other words, it must permit the estimation of the likelihood that certain organizational devices and material will produce social effects, or the likelihood that certain individuals will communicate and think in a certain way. For example, it must allow for the prediction of the effects that the intensification of communication between individuals without previous ties between them may have on their mutual behaviour, their categories of thought, and the production of their identity.\(^{16}\)

It must allow, for instance, for the prediction of whether certain individuals, based on their position within the division of social labour or their degree of access to certain social situations, are more likely than others to adopt certain types of communication practices, to benefit from certain information, and to place value and interest on certain types of goods.\(^{17}\) Once again, in this case, if we want to maintain the precedence of a theory of action, the predictions that will be made must not pertain to strict determinism but rather to probabilistic reasoning. Moreover, they must take into account the continuation of transformation processes, in other words, the fact that the socio-organizational conditions that give these predictions their current validity must necessarily evolve, thus rendering the predictions in question more or less valuable.

15. One of the hypotheses that can be ventured is most definitely that modern capitalist societies are marked by an unprecedented growth in the global number and frequency of interactions, and therefore communication, between humans – in particular, as seen in large urban centers as well as through the development of mass media, between humans who are unrelated in the family sense or have no previous mutual ties (for more details, see Tarde, 1989; Eisenstein, 1979; Thompson, 2000). The task will first be to verify and inherently document such a hypothesis. It is also necessary, if, as it seems appropriate to consider, the hypothesis turns out to be at least partially well-founded, to then explain the phenomenon that it describes – which will likely call for analysis, on various scales, of the processes of the transformation of the social structure and physical organization that are characteristic of the past and present development of modern societies. The task could also be to explore the social and political effects of the phenomenon and to make them predictable, with one of the important considerations undoubtedly being that nothing indicates that an increase in the flow of communication necessarily leads to – quite on the contrary – an increase in its interactivity and reciprocity. Last of all, the task could also be to criticize certain forms currently taken on by the phenomena – in particular, the reification of the forms of communication that it causes and in parallel, the naturalization of social asymmetries that it produces.

16. For more details, see, for example, Pasquier (1999), Flichy (2010), (Cochoy, Licoppe, 182).

17. See, for example, Donnat, Tolila (2003), Coulangeon (2011).
Lastly, the theory in question will also have to be a critical theory. In other words, it must serve to determine which social behaviours or which beliefs can be recognized as being pathological from a strictly sociological point of view. In this regard, it is appropriate to adopt a Durkheimian approach to emphasize that no sociological criticism of society can be seriously undertaken if a set of criteria to distinguish between normal and pathological has not been established beforehand (Durkheim, 1987: 47-75). All too often, social criticism seems to consider that it is society in its entirety – totalitarian society or capitalist society, for example – that is pathological. While this point of view may not be reprehensible in itself, it is not the type of critical position that makes the sociological enterprise possible. For a sociologist, it is strange, to say the least, to claim that a society considered in its entirety is pathological: the fact that it exists and therefore “functions,” even very poorly, proves that there is something normal about this. This is why Durkheim, as we know, does not criticize the accentuation of the division of labour typical of modernity, but rather criticizes only the fact that it was not accompanied by the legal-moral regulation that he claims was necessary in this case. It is only this lack of regulation that he denounces as being pathogenic. This position directs me toward what I am tempted to call an internal critique of society. The specific contribution of sociology to social critique is that it does not compare society with a norm of functioning that is totally unknown to it; rather, it produces criticism that, in taking into account the real state of this society and its effective norms of functioning, points to that which is abnormal in its current legal-moral regulation.

In many senses, sociology invites us to posit that the pathological aspect of contemporary societies is their enduring tendency to naturalize the social world. This tendency was not as pathological in pre-modern societies, as it corresponded to the norms inherent to the organization of social relations. On the other hand, in our societies, where the inherent norms of functioning are based on legal equality with regard to the state and the market, the naturalization of social relations tends to become a pathological phenomenon. In addition, it may be predicted that it will become more and more pathological as the division of labour becomes increasingly pronounced in the future, if this is in fact the case, leading to the establishment of inherent norms of functioning based on the principle of legal equality and individual rights. If this prediction is correct, the purpose of the sociological theories that I am outlining here is a critique not of the social relations, gender relations, hierarchies, inequalities, morals, or institutions observable within our societies, but rather of the fact that these realities continue to be conceived of as natural and unchanging
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rather than historical, evolving, and collectively transformable. In other words, the critical dimension of the sociological theories that I describe here relates essentially to their ability to combat the reification of social relations.\textsuperscript{18}

CONCLUSION

My argument can be summarized as follows: the theories of action and communication that we need today must be as sociological as possible. This requires, first of all, that researchers adopt truly theoretical aims in their research and disregard beliefs according to which sociology is capable of becoming a purely empirical approach over the more or less short term. As mentioned above, this type of ultra-empiricist ideal is flawed, in that it overlooks the fact that the research and data analysis methods employed by researchers always necessarily contain implicit theories of action and society. This is why I have stressed that adopting a theoretical aim for sociology consists primarily in clarifying and opening up for discussion the existing methodological positions. It does not consist in jumping into the arms of philosophy to imitate the processes it uses to create concepts, or to borrow its theoretical perspectives on society in their current form. On the contrary, the task at hand is to affirm the existence of a specifically sociological way of establishing a theoretical-conceptual way of thinking, the vitality of which emanates from empirical research.

The fact that the theories of action and communication that we need must be as sociological as possible has a second consequence: on the methodological level, they cannot be limited solely to the primary tasks of sociology, and, on the theoretical level, they cannot be limited solely to the issue of action understood in its indexicality and communicational dimension. The aim must

\textsuperscript{18} In many senses, this approach corresponds to the one articulated by J. Habermas that I mention at the beginning of this article. In both cases, the main concern is to base the critique on the identification of a criterion of what is pathological, and which characteristically is internal to the activity in question. Moreover, the internal criterion identified may seem identical: for Habermas, it is the impediment of the reciprocity and reversibility of the communication; in the viewpoints given here, it is the reification of social relations and therefore the naturalization of their current asymmetry. However, a significant difference remains: Habermas’ approach is philosophical in that it attempts to extricate universal conditions (in other words, conditions which are transcendental, logical, and a-historical) from human communication; by contrast, the approach set out here is strictly sociological in that it aims to specify the normative requirements specific to a given type of society (in the current case, modern societies). This is an example of what we referred to earlier as the conversionist position: Habermas’ philosophical approach is transformed from a sociological point of view and is not directly transposed.
be to link the primary tasks with the execution of secondary tasks, and to link these theories of communicational action with theories of society or modernity. In this process of extension, the difficulty is never to lose sight of the methodological approach from which the possibility of explaining, predicting, and criticizing communication practices is determined by the necessity of first being capable of describing and understanding these practices. On the theoretical level, this challenge is represented by the need for a theory of action and communication which, as opposed to being deduced from a theory of society or modernity, serves, on the contrary, to construct the framework of the latter.

Finally, the fact that the theories of action and communication that we need must be as sociological as possible has one last consequence: they must also be as anthropological and historical as possible. This is a conclusion that can be drawn from what I state at the beginning of my argument regarding sociology’s “epistemological indiscernibility” from anthropology and history, and the fact that the three disciplines form a unit that can be given the name of “the science of action and communication, and therefore the science of society.” It is clear that the appeal here for the development of theories with an explanatory role can be understood as a way to encourage communications research to open itself up even more to the contributions of history and anthropology. If the goal is effectively to reconstruct the historical transformation processes that have led to contemporary situations, and therefore to venture to think of something as a general movement of modern capitalist societies, there is no doubt that a discussion with historians would be very useful – even given that establishing a sociological theory of modernity is clearly not usually their stated goal. ¹⁹ It will likewise be very useful to develop a more systematic comparison with the work of anthropologists studying societies that have undergone historical trajectories different from those of our own. ²⁰ We can be sure that this enhanced communication with history and anthropology will provide communication specialists with valuable help in improving their performance of explanatory, predictive, and critical tasks. This would involve being open to processes of human communication pertaining to ancient periods and even extremely ancient periods of time, as well as communication processes situated outside of the cultural arena of Europe and North America.

¹⁹. That is the main difficulty with regard to the dialogue that needs to be initiated. It is a question not so much of highlighting the value per se of factual studies on the history of communication devices (of which there are many), but rather of learning the lessons – which is rarely the case – from the point of view of a sociological theory of modernity.

²⁰. At one point Réseaux opened this promising way. See in particular (Mead, 52).


MEAD G. H. (1934), Mind, Self and Society, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.


PASQUIER D. (1999), La culture des sentiments. L’expérience télévisuelle des adolescents, Paris, Éditions de la MSH.


