



On the Principles of a Social Theory

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Abstract

This paper addresses the problem of how to identify a small and parsimonious set of principles or “postulates” that may help us understand the great theoretical foundations of the social sciences. From a philosophical point of view, it presents ten premises that are perhaps essential for any attempt at elaborating a social theory.

When one tries to elaborate a theory of society based on the principles of reason and experience, first it is essential to examine the nature of the fundamental elements that should be included in such a model. As it happens with a great variety of frameworks in the natural sciences, it is inevitable for the social researcher to start with postulates, susceptible to improvement or elimination, but always latent in any statement.

How to successfully combine the conceptual and the empirical dimensions represents one of the greatest challenges of the social sciences. The method employed by the natural sciences achieves an *optimum* in the relation between the conceptual and empirical realms: it gradually refines the first in interaction with the second, and enriches our possible knowledge of the second, thanks to the first. In this fruitful synthesis of reason, observation and experience lies one of the foremost intellectual conquests of the human mind, since it has provided us with a virtually infallible strategy to unravel the mysteries of nature.

In the social and humanistic disciplines, it is legitimate to consider what indispensable postulates should appear in any successful attempt to subsume the vast heterogeneity of human phenomena under certain theoretical paradigms. Of course, a considerable number of models have addressed this issue from different perspectives, often diverging. I do not want to insist on this point, or analyze them with the historical and systematic prolixity that they would demand; I simply seek to sketch a brief and succinct list of postulates from which, in my opinion, no theoretical model can be exempted. Extracted from experience, deduced from pure reason or inferred from a combination of both faculties, many of these principles may seem obvious to everyone, but their evidence does not contradict their explanatory inexorability. Indeed, they can be conceived as heuristic rules that tentatively orient our understanding of human activity.

First, any social science aims to understand the combined activity of human beings. Therefore, the inexcusable starting point is the human being as a biological entity in possession of cognitive abilities far superior to those of other animals in dimensions such as the power of abstraction, symbolism and inventiveness.

The human being, however, does not enter the biological sphere in magical ways, but as the product of millions of years of genetic mutations that, filtered by natural selection, have led a branch of the class of mammals to evolve in one specific direction. Therefore, to understand human action, it is unavoidable to study the need for adaptation to specific natural conditions, since this exogenous driving force underlies many of the developments experienced by different human groups. Environmental pressures have categorically conditioned the evolution of the various human communities. Man seeks to adapt himself to the environment so that he can satisfy innate or acquired needs, and in this *tour de force* against an immense and indifferent nature, deaf to his desires, he is forced to expand his creative abilities. Immersed in the struggle against an often hostile environment, the human species does not differ from other forms of life, having embarked on an incessant struggle against the environment and against other creatures for the sake of survival and reproduction. However, the human being does not simply adapt himself to the environment, but enjoys a cognitive power so remarkable that permits him to adapt the environment to his own needs. Thus, the adaptive effort is complemented by an indisputable impulse to transform those same natural conditions in which he lives. Indeed, here one can appreciate the trace of human creativity, the preeminent manifestations of which reside in the development of technology and in the progress of knowledge. Thus, inheritance, work and chance shine as three fundamental principles when it comes to understanding human activity: that which is explained by biology, that which is transmitted by culture and continued by the present work of man and that which is produced by the uncontrollable forces that many times determine human existence. It seems then inevitable to use three major methodological strategies to shed light on the nature and possibilities of human activity.

The first of them will study the logic of the inherited elements, that is, the insertion of the historical course followed by the different human groups in rational patterns and in a mechanism of concatenations of causes and effects. The second will deal with the work of human beings: with action in its present, abstracted from time and circumscribed to individual psychology, the fruit of mental deliberation, to elucidate the rational and emotional motivations that move human beings to transform the environment and themselves. The third will focus on the inevitable contingencies that prevent us from subordinating human activity to a strict and irrevocable logic, susceptible to predictability from the historical background or from the psychological causes themselves. This methodology will try to subsume the different types of chance in basic and repeated typologies.

Third, in a theoretical model of human activity it is necessary to take into consideration the importance of social skills as defining elements of the human condition. This sociability is not, of course, exclusive to the human species, but in us it reaches incomparable peaks, sources of countless possibilities for cooperation, although also of increasingly sophisticated forms of conflict. Such social skills are largely mediated by the existence of articulated languages, which exponentially multiply the possibilities of combining ideas and contribute to incrementing the expressive complexity of the human mind.

Fourth, environmental pressures and the role played by the inheritance of certain cultural forms do not completely eclipse the fact that each individual develops particular habits,

preferences and aspirations, though he is undoubtedly influenced by the community to which he belongs and in which he becomes aware of his own identity. In this way, every theoretical model of human activity must include the individual element. It is legitimate to believe that progress in our understanding of the human mind will lead to a fruitful synthesis of the neuroscientific perspective and the cultural approach, thereby illuminating our knowledge of the decisions that individuals make within the social contexts in which they operate. Comprehending the combined interaction of human minds in a certain biological and social niche requires clarifying the mechanisms that the brain uses to explore the world and face the different challenges that may emerge. Thus, neuroscience stands as the true bridge between the sciences of nature and the human sciences; the behavioral complexity of our species is rooted in the wonderful organization of a brain that, through neurons, synapses, glial cells and an extraordinary computing power, is capable of creatively assimilating external influences and identifying innovative strategies to transform the world around us.

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Of the main forms of interaction between individuals, the two basic types are cooperation and conflict. They can be motivated both by external circumstances (such as environmental pressures) and internal causes (such as the development of certain values). Therefore, and in the fifth place, it seems necessary to pay attention to the more general manifestations of cooperation and conflict. It is not surprising then that game theory—and, in a deeper sense, theories of rationality and irrationality—be meant to shed light on the interaction between human beings. Again, understanding the reason and unreason of human behavior demands delving into the workings of our mind, based on cerebral mechanisms that exhibit a fascinating mixture of complexity and simplicity. The synthesis of neuroscience, theory of rationality, sociology and history represents an exciting challenge to extend and perfect our scientific worldview.

Sixth, it is indisputable that divergent goals among individuals coexist with common aspirations and preferences, probably rooted in the physical, emotional and rational nature of the human being. It is impossible to understand human activity without deciphering this delicate intertwining of the collective (the biological and cultural heritage of a certain group) and the individual (the development of a unique identity and the ability to creatively navigate the world). The reciprocity that characterizes both realms forces us to understand what strategies have been designed throughout history to optimize the relation between these two inescapable dimensions of the human species, in our being and in our actions.

Thus, and in the seventh place, a descriptive social theory (prelude to a more ambitious explanatory model) cannot neglect a question of intuitively normative resonances: how to maximize the creative capacity of individuals and at the same time minimize their mutual

collisions. It can be said that the study of explanatory categories and their contrast with the data drawn from anthropology, history and sociology merely evokes the theoretical dimension of the social sciences, while the analysis of their applications for the improvement of human existence points to its practical dimension. Although a scientific model legitimately aspires to exonerate itself from addressing normative questions or from making evaluative judgments, human activity always faces dilemmas that, in general terms, it seeks to resolve in the most efficient way. When there is a diversity of strategies, the question arises as to the cause that motivates the choice of one or the other. If the natural sciences lead harmoniously to technology, which reveals the practical understanding of theoretical principles (the ability to distill from their content those consequences that may be useful for satisfying certain goals), in the social sciences it is possible to discern an essentially analogous process, through which a better understanding of how individual minds and societies work can help us elaborate social systems closer to our needs and aspirations.

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In the eighth place, it seems necessary to ask how culture, that which the human being adds to nature, emerges from certain biological conditions while at the same raising new explanatory elements. If in biological evolution the law of natural selection prevails (over which individuals and species virtually lack any power of resistance, because they live at its mercy and can only confront it with the physical characteristics inherited from their ancestors and with the precarious contribution of their own effort), in the case of human beings a new law is born, which we could call “rational selection.” The equivalent of natural selection would therefore be the conscious activity of man, which rationally selects and discriminates according to goals, supervened or created. It superimposes itself on mere natural facticity and configures worlds beyond the world that the physical universe offers. Endowed with an exuberant imagination, we anticipate possible scenarios and creatively modify the circumstances to meet our needs, impulses and aspirations. The strength of a blind selection, which only seeks to maximize the reproductive success of individual varieties, then cedes the witness to a rational selection, formalized according to principles that the human being assimilates and uses consciously. Therefore, and rather than succumbing to biological inexorabilities, we strive to identify new principles for understanding reality, capable of triggering the emergence of new “worlds,” that is, environments selected by human beings, and not only legacies of nature. On many occasions, this innate creative impulse can be conceived, indeed, as the inevitable reaction to a constant cascade of environmental pressures, whose effects force us to evolve. However, it seems reasonable to postulate that, along with a reactive creativity, a free and spontaneous class of creativity subsists, hardly associable to concrete stimuli that are external to the activity of the human mind, a faculty that constantly lends itself to combining ideas and making projections.

In the ninth place, the analysis of the joint activity of human beings cannot fail to examine the organizational problems faced by human groups, given that they share the same habitat, which is subject to countless constrictions: how to dispose in the most rational way (that is, in the most universal, parsimonious and optimized mode, that with a smaller number of presuppositions is able to incorporate more information), the common life of the members of the human species, or how to realize their possibilities in the context of a set of needs and contingencies. This is the most obvious result of the interdependence of human beings, connected by physical and cultural links. The members of a human group face scarcity of resources and overabundance of needs and desires. Furthermore, their knowledge has seldom, if ever, been acquired in a purely individual way, for it has been obtained by learning what others have discovered and taught. Thus, human beings establish heterogeneous social bonds, often alterable, but always present in one way or another, because individual actions inevitably impact other individuals. When there are different biological and social heritages, the challenge is to optimize individual divergences in order, on the one hand, to avoid conflicts and abuses and, on the other hand, to promote collective progress (such that the development of some individuals may not hinder, but rather enhance the development of others, given their mutual interdependence and inescapable common needs). No matter how ambitious its theoretical pretensions are, no social model can artificially abstract human beings from their historical context. Just as we can inherit knowledge, technologies and beneficial values, past conflicts are often responsible for serious asymmetries of power, thereby generating relations of oppression and subordination that in many cases are historically transmitted and seriously affect the initial situations of individuals. Hence, a pressing problem emerges: the question of how to reconcile the principle of difference and that of solidarity. The ability to optimize the relation between both principles defines the creativity and success of a particular social group, its ability to guide in satisfactory ways the creative tension between divergence and convergence. It is therefore important to understand how power is distributed in society, and how this process depends on the distribution of knowledge. Power is mediated by material conditions and shared beliefs in the form of social relationships, by ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ mechanisms. Thus, it mirrors a hardly quantifiable mixture of efficiency and arbitrariness.

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Finally, a relevant field of social research invites us to understand how the inherited conditions can be rationalized according to goals. The problem could be formulated in the following way: how human rational selection modifies that which is inherited, so that in different cultural contexts it may be possible to design interpretative frameworks that determine what needs and aspirations should be met. Here a premise (perhaps questionable) is assumed: that beyond evaluative differences it is possible for individuals and groups to reach rational agreements, founded upon the existence of a common capacity for abstraction, formalization and analysis that defines the human mind. However, interpreted as a heuristic rule, this conviction does not impose itself as a theoretical burden; indeed, it can help us

to understand why individuals and groups, despite their divergences, have been able to cooperate and solve a variety of problems together.

Thus, in the study of human activity three great realms are juxtaposed: the biological, whose conclusions offer theoretical bases to understand the human condition and the predominant evolutionary forces that have molded it; the cultural, that seeks to understand the symbolic and technological development of humanity; and the other, more elusive and subtle, that could be described as *rational*, since it refers to the possibility of grasping permanent laws in thought and nature, a process which characterizes to a large extent the intellectual history of our mind. This last dimension may raise theoretical suspicions, but the potential doubts dissipate if one considers that, in addition to biological and technological evolution, the human being can acquire knowledge about the universe as such, about its laws and about the relations between pure objects of thought (as it is the case in the formal sciences, like logic and mathematics). Our mind opens itself, therefore, to a truly universal content, which is no longer subsidiary to biology or culture, but refers to a more fundamental sphere. Of course, and viewed from a more practical point of view, the level of knowledge acquired by an individual or a human group conditions their self-understanding and the development of their expectations. This is the reason why it stands as a force that significantly affects the biological and cultural realms. However, and beyond the usefulness of knowledge for humanity, the most abstract and universal forms of knowledge to which reason can ascend may be contemplated as ends in themselves, because the human being, as part of nature, will hardly find a deeper horizon than that of knowing the universe to which he belongs.

The postulates that have just been enumerated in a rather concise manner do not exhaust the theoretical and empirical principles of social research. Nevertheless, sometimes it is interesting to synthesize ideas and data in order to acquire a more complete awareness of the assumptions that guide our scientific inquiries. Given that no human discourse is free of presuppositions (one of the basic premises refers, indeed, to the very idea that it is possible to rationally understand the universe), the act of highlighting the existence of some fundamental principles does not diminish the dignity of the scientific enterprise, but stimulates it, in an incessant search of ever more universal and deeper categories and frames, of increasing perfection both in their extension (the number of objects that they cover) and intension (their ability to elucidate the basic elements of those same objects).

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