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Towards a Dialogical Sociology

Abstract: Most sociological action theories and typologies were not able to establish interdependencies and sequences between different types of action. They also ignored the existential meaning of the choices the typologies implicitly involved. The imaginative dispositions and the ability to critically examine one's own presuppositions are shown to constitute action as a future-oriented, self-expressing, and interpersonal phenomenon. Both dimensions may be found in the Socratic dialogical attitude but should not be taken as constituting a normative nor even a desirable type of action. The article identifies several limits of dialogue and its relationships with other types of action defined according to the same criteria.

Keywords: sociological theory, theory of action, existentialism, dialogue, communication, interaction, pragmatism

Introduction

The physicist David Bohm wrote that one of the main obstacles to dialogue lay in the human inability to differentiate between one's tentative opinion and one's personal background consisting of past experiences, emotions, and a sense of identity. According to Bohm, we tend to defend our thoughts as parts of our person but, on the other hand, it is precisely the fragmentation of the world through thought that is responsible for the errors and illusions of our cognition. As Bohm put it, 'thought is very active, but the process of thought thinks that it is doing nothing—that it is just telling you the way things are' (Bohm 1996: 11–12). In other words, each thought has a blind spot, which is the process of thought itself. This continuous process produces conjectures and images that order the world and secure a sense of continuity for the thinking subject. Therefore, the gradual process of identity-building through thought has a dark side: the immunization of individuals against a critical self-awareness and, as a consequence, a loss of truth. For this reason, dialogue poses a theoretical problem: being focused on one's own thought enhances narratives that harmonize with the paths of action taken in the past and makes them unquestionable while they may be precisely what poses a problem.

In the following paper I depict sociology as the art of dealing with a specific aspect of that fundamental problem. In the first section I illustrate the problem by comparing selected classical concepts of sociology and society. In the second section I differentiate between dialogue, communication, and interaction. The third section introduces the existential idea of dialogue on the grounds of the Socratic approach to thought. Finally, the concluding fourth section demonstrates the dialogical practices in sociology.

Thought and Society

What is controversial in sociology is not the human being nor the society in their respective solitude, but the relationship between individual and society or, to quote the famous handbook by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966), the internalization of the society in the individual and the externalization of the individual in the society. These simultaneous processes may be interpreted as metaphors of the problem of dialogue highlighted by Bohm.

Max Weber defines 'society' at different places, once with reference to Tönnies' concept of Gesellschaft (1976 [1922]: 22), and once as a 'general structural form' of communities (1976 [1922]: 212). But at the heart of his idea of sociology lies a continuous interest in the conduct of individual actors who orient themselves either at the expectations of others or at social orders (1976 [1922]: 11–12). According to this concept, societies are no more than complex bundles of conjectures produced by actors who advocate their more or less stable, material and ideal interests. As a result, the essence of social reality is a lengthy conflict between parties who continue to produce sophisticated justifications of their positions (Boudon 2001: 97–100). The immanent logical problems and ramifications of the rationalization processes lead to a general pessimistic outlook of the Weberian sociology (Löwith 1993 [1982]: 69–72).

An apparent inversion of this position, being, in fact, its most significant counterpart, is to be found in the work of Emile Durkheim. He implicitly deals with the problem of dialogue in the context of utterly different concepts and hypotheses. Instead of juxtaposing thinking actors with their emancipated thoughts, Durkheim contrasts two theoretically opposed realms of thought: the individual and the collective representations (Durkheim 1974). The relationships between these two kinds of experiences, judgments, and interpretations of reality take different forms among various cultures. Remarkably, when modern societies become more interdependent, as a consequence of mushrooming contracts between free agents, the new collective ideals of rights-oriented 'sacredness of the person' are, at first, too weak to alleviate the sharp tensions generated by the egoistic individualism of alienated and uprooted individuals. The problem of integration becomes, then, more conspicuous and urgent, but cannot be adequately addressed, as long as the 'sacredness of the person' is confronted with well established particularistic solidarities (Joas 2012: 203–207). To put it plainly, collective representations are no less blind to their own consequences than individual thoughts are.

Both Weber and Durkheim seem to be aware only of one side of the problem under consideration. Weber locates it only in the growing rationalization of social organizations and views individual freedom as endangered, while Durkheim fears social disintegration and hopes for a better moral education, which would secure a seamless adaptation of individuals into the society. As opposed to Weber, whose work is focused on the constitution of society by individual actions, and the dynamics of ideals in interpretation processes, Durkheim distinguishes a collective type of representations and interprets it as an independent variable determining individual actions. Despite this basic difference between the ways Weber and Durkheim conceptualize society, both identify it eventually with truths and ideas that become independent of their originators and crystallize as causal forces—

ontologically subjective or objective. Thus the European fathers of sociology focus mostly on the consequences of thought, on its products and not on the ongoing process of thought itself.

A further step towards a better understanding of thought, taken by American pragmatists, is a recognition of the interdependence between thought and social processes, expressed in the concept of the 'social Self.' William James deals with the peculiarities of private experiences and emphasizes their existential irreducibility in explaining social phenomena. George Herbert Mead takes the social processes of mutual stimulation as his point of departure and explains the development of the Self by reconstructing the way in which individuals reflect inhibitions of action and simultaneously develop an internalized social attitude towards themselves (Mead 1938: 367–369). The tension between individual and society collapses in his theory because he incorporates the concept of mind into a behavioristic model of action. Thus Mead explains the growing capability to control the environment and moral responsibility as closely interrelated evolutionary achievements that emerged in a social—interpersonal or internalized—process of communication. Communication itself is, in his view, a form of participation in this process: 'When a man calls out "Fire!" he is not only exciting other people but himself in the same fashion. He knows what he is about. That, you see, constitutes biologically what we refer to as a "universe of discourse." It is a common meaning which is communicated to everyone and at the same time is communicated to the Self. The individual is directing other people how to act, and he is taking the attitude of the other people whom he is directing' (Mead 1936: 380).

With regard to the problem of dialogue, which has been formulated by Bohm, one can raise doubts, if Mead addresses all the cumbersome externalizations brought to the forefront of sociological thought by Weber and Durkheim. He probably believes that these problems may be disposed of as hurdles to overcome at subsequent stages of the creative process of society (1936: 363–365). To put it differently, he rather understands thought as a function of problem-solving processes and not as a process which inevitably generates new problems. His theory has thus become a paradigm for numerous concepts that identify communication with a universal tool of progress.

Communication and Interaction

In the situation outlined above, in which sociology finds itself, there is a need for a concept of dialogue which would address the tension between the creative process of thought and its inhibiting social consequences. In this paper I claim that the concept should not be limited to the area of communication nor to the organization of interaction, and, as a consequence, I want to argue for a multidimensional, existential concept of dialogue. In the conclusion I will critically assess certain developments in contemporary sociology and outline some perspectives for a dialogical approach.

To begin with the concept of communication, the 20th century was a time when this term became virtually ubiquitous and of primary theoretical importance for social sciences. It still provides a basis for both interactional and functionalist approaches. The latter is, for instance, to be found in Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems, in which communi-

cation figures as its basic and irreducible element. Obviously there is no reason to deny the omnipresence of communication and its importance for the dynamics of contemporary societies. On the other hand, the practical significance of communication exhibits a precariousness of the sociological theories that explain communication as the basic element of society. At the heart of their endeavor lies the belief that communication entails inherent mechanisms which resolve social conflicts and secure the stability of the social order. These mechanisms should, however, be explained because a contrary opinion seems to be equally credible: communication involves intersubjective background knowledge and common norms, but may be also used as a tool of manipulation or may escalate a conflict.

The linguistic turn, which took place in the 20th century, has been concisely expressed in John Langshaw Austin's observation that our utterances are meaningful if they are anchored in specific situations of action, that is, if they are 'speech acts.' But communication may be also extended to non-verbal behaviors and linguistic games—to phenomena which are even more indicative of the functionality of the concept of 'communication.' The function of communication does not necessarily need to be mutual understanding, nor the transfer of knowledge. These functions may be essential to modern societies characterized by a plurality of belief systems and fragmentation of lifestyles. But, for example, in the Roman Empire with its problem of developing a law which would be adequate to diverse local rules, communication was instrumental in elaborating a system of legal concepts that would be abstract enough to secure a certainty of contracts across the large territory. It provided litigants with an extremely formal and ritualistic frame of reference (Schiavone 2012: 92–104). The age of Renaissance, drawing on Hellenistic models, saw a growing interest in communication as a tool of self-expression in the arts and sciences, combining it with little regard for agreements. Romanticism discovered the identity-building qualities of communication, perfectly exhibited in the German word *Kulturgut*. As Novalis put it, 'The more personal, local, peculiar [eigentümlicher] of its own time a poem is, the nearer it stands to the center of poetry' (Novalis 1837: 224–225 c.f. Lovejoy 1964: 307). Finally, our age seems to be concerned with communication itself, communication as a basis for further communication and thus creating a stronger bond of association between people. As Richard McKeon suggests, 'communication depends on common principles—assumptions and meanings, purposes and values—but common meanings can be established only by communication and agreement' (1990: 93–94). A necessary condition of this circle of communication is the ambiguity of what is being communicated. 'Democracy,' 'freedom' or 'truth' are, for example, widespread terms with various interpretations, some of which are diametrically opposed to the interpretations of others. In spite of the specifically modern pressure on being univocal and precise, communication may continue only if there is enough space for interpretation and sheer tautology remains concealed. Actors are required to be specific and to discriminate, but there is still a tacit ambiguity in the background of interaction. In his work on the social functions of ambivalence, Donald Levine highlights the pivotal role of ambiguity in both modern and traditional cultures. Apart from indicating mysticism, diffuseness of solidaristic symbols and metaphoric self-expression as examples of ambiguity, he thoroughly describes the flight from ambiguity in the modern world and points to dialogue as the best remedy against fragmentation. His later concept of dialogue may be interpreted as an elaboration on the lost ambiguity. He defines dialogue as 'open-

ing ourselves to a wider range of options, […] opening ourselves to the positions of others' (1995: 324). If his reasoning is to be followed, every act of communication contains a potential for dialogue, which might be realized only on some level of ambiguity. Levine ultimately comes to think of sociological theories as incommensurable but describing the same world in different ways.

Taking into account the Goffmanian tension between interaction dynamics and the demand for authenticity, ambiguity of communication seems to be just a protective strategy. We want to be authentic, but if we do not know what authenticity really is, we must content ourselves with being working elements of the social machine, and with using frames offered to us by the culture we share with partners in our interactions. Unfortunately, as Goffman argued, there is a number of competing frames and no paramount criteria of their selection, apart from sheer interests. Reflecting on this kind of fragmentation, Hans Blumenberg admits that the vagueness of language is a precondition of dialogue, but also claims that the specialization and fragmentation of knowledge allows no further ambiguity inside of 'regionalized' areas of science and technology. Thus, according to Blumenberg, in the vacuum between the separated regions of knowledge, the role of dialogue must be overtaken by philosophy, which would orient itself at a 'controlled unequivocality' (1981: 143).

In a historical analysis of *chronotopos*, Mikhail Bakhtin claims that, as a consequence of social differentiation, people's private lives had been separated from historical frameworks and had lost their original meaning. On the other hand, complex symbolic references of language had been deprived of their context and were gradually assigned with new superficial meanings. To quote Bakhtin,

The course of individual lives, of groups, and of the sociopolitical whole do not fuse together, they are dispersed, there are gaps; they are measured by different scales of value; each of these series has its own logic of development, its own narratives, each makes use of and reinterprets the ancient motifs in its own way (1981: 214–215).

Dialogue is, thus, a lengthy and challenging process of bringing meaning back into human life. It is most likely to succeed if themes that occupy the central place in human affairs might be linked anew to other, secondary areas of life. To quote Bakhtin again,

the central and basic motif in the narrative of individual life-sequences became love, that is, the sublimated form of the sexual act and of fertility. This motif provides a vast number of possible directions for sublimation to take, possibilities for metaphorical expansion in diverse directions (for which language serves as the most readily available medium), for enrichment at the expense of any remaining survivals of the past (1981: 215).

In our context it is important to add that Bakhtin, in contrast to Goffman or Blumenberg, appreciates the holistic claim of dialogue and considers dialogue as a way of bringing communication back into its natural context.

The concept of communication is thus neither to be identified with dialogue nor to be conceptualized as the basic element of social life. It is rather to be taken as an indicator of deeper social processes encompassing identity development and interaction dynamics. Therefore dialogue is not just a matter of improved communication or a more precise way of addressing each other. It has more to do with the orientation of our conduct in general and with the basis of communication than with communication itself.

The second fallacy in defining dialogue manifests itself in accepting the secondary role of communication and, instead, identifying dialogue with the fact of seamless interaction.

According to this view, dialogue is identical with a specific kind of mutual orientation. As a consequence, dialogue would never be possible in the form of an individual action or an individual way of thinking. Moreover, it would always require a mutual disposition of communication partners. One could, then, for the duration of their life, hope for a dialogue and never have an opportunity to make it happen. According to this view, dialogue signifies successful interaction, that is, a developing relationship advantageous to both sides.

This approach ignores the fact that each interaction involves specific goals that are not necessarily identical for both parties. As a result, the interaction-oriented concept of dialogue tends to reduce interaction to formal models of mutual adaptation and satisfaction. The most prominent example of this are sociological exchange theories which usually abstract from specific claims and arguments by quantifying social phenomena and presupposing individual concepts of utility (Boudon 2001: 57–69).

In my opinion, dialogue should not be confused with interaction even though it has a lot to do with the way people engage in interactions. If we do not want to reduce human motivation to a mere avoidance of pain and striving for pleasure, we have to ask what ideas of good and evil people share in different epochs and cultural settings. From this broader perspective, hedonism and utilitarianism appear to be just particular concepts of what is good and why. However, the question of what is a life worth living is not just a theoretical one. It is a question that arises for everyone who starts to think about the meaning of their life. Only on this level of reflection does interaction become a serious problem, because it proves to be much more than a series of interdependent reactions. The other person becomes for me a companion on my way to a valuable life and a partner in my quest for the good. The idea of dialogue, which I propose here, refers basically to an individual action. It involves interaction only as far as another person is necessary for an examined life. In other words, interaction and communication may be helpful in dialogical action, but do not make it up nor are implied in it.

The Existential Concept of Dialogue

It would be convenient for theoretical purposes to differentiate between dialogue and other forms of behavior in the course of interaction. Moreover, I think that dialogue may be practiced even without any consent or cooperation of the interaction partners. A good example is the way Socrates deals with his discussants in Laches. He tries to bring them into a philosophical dispute instead of imposing on them his own opinion as to the value of educating young people in the art of fighting in armor. When the dispute leads to the problem of defining courage, Nikias and Laches argue for different concepts of it and quote arguments that differ in content, formal character, and style. Laches proceeds inductively and represents a casuistic, practical perspective, while Nikias is searching for a general concept and deduces its concrete consequences. His theoretical view is repeatedly rejected by empirical examples quoted by Laches who, in turn, can hardly find appropriate words to describe his idea of courage. Even though the discussants seem to complement one another, they continue to discredit the opponent rather than to question their own positions. Nikias and Laches represent two opposing views that can be roughly described as representing the

theoretical and the practical perspective. Although the dispute, guided by the questions of Socrates, brings them from a behavioral and casuistic understanding of courage, through the level of action-orientation to the level of knowledge about what is good, they seem to be blind to the progress they have made in the course of the dialogue and complain about the fruitlessness of the conversation. Their disappointment may likely be shared by an inattentive reader, since the initial question of the text finds no definitive answer. It is only Socrates who learns from both his interlocutors and, by the end, asserts his hope for further education: '…everyone of us should seek out the best teacher whom he can find' (201a).

In the course of the dialogue Socrates demonstrates several qualities which may be called specifically Socratic and may be found in other dialogues as well. But in Laches it is the dialogical quality of his action that comes to the fore. Socrates is aware of his ignorance and, for this reason, is open to the advice of Nikias and Laches. While leading the conversation, he advocates concepts that would be independent of specific situations but coherent with individual instances. While Nikias and Laches are reluctant to make any concessions in defending their positions, Socrates concedes that he 'doesn't know' and tries to examine the presuppositions of his interlocutors by representing simultaneously their respective positions. At the same time, he refutes the arguments of the discussants by using their own methods of thinking. Sometimes he finds relationships and affinities between the ideas suggested in the dispute.

The juxtaposition of the Socratic attitude with the self-confidence and reluctance to continue the dialogue makes Laches an illuminating piece of work and, apart from being a literary 'dialogue,' also illustrates what dialogue is in the existential sense of the word. It exhibits all the Socratic qualities that constitute what I want to call a dialogical action. Firstly, it is critical self-assessment, putting oneself in a secondary position. Secondly, the Socratic dialogue involves a careful examination of one person's judgments from the perspective of his or her partner but using methods of the one whose judgments are under consideration. Thirdly, it involves an openness to the perspective of the other and a search for coherence between individual judgments and a general concept. In Laches readers are encouraged to see that Socrates exemplifies more than just a method of thinking. Dialectics is an aspect of action which is open to other persons and to knowledge.

The existential concept of dialogue entails two constitutive features. Firstly, the dialogical action involves the taking of the perspective of the other and, secondly, putting the presuppositions of both interlocutors into question. Especially the first feature may be misleading. By taking the perspective of the other I do not mean the attitude or the social role of the other, that is, the disposition to act as the other would. This interpretation stands closer to George Herbert Mead's understanding of the 'taking of the role of the other' but what I mean here is rather an imaginary effort to understand the judgment of the other out of the context of her or his life.

What are the consequences of the above mentioned definition of dialogue? First of all, it is not a purely cognitive notion and is not confined to certain ways of reasoning or rhetorical tools convincing others of the soundness of certain judgments. Dialogue is not a matter of specialized knowledge because it concerns human life as a whole, in all its aspects and relationships. As such, it requires an existential turn which implies that, as far as philosophy wants to be dialogical, it also has to transcend the scope of pure theory and start

to realize one of the ancient concepts of philosophy implying a specific way of life (Cooper 2012). The Socratic idea of the Good would have no meaning if Socrates had not refused to allow his friends to organize his escape. For, why should one not act in accordance with the guidance of wisdom after having accepted its philosophical foundation?

On the other hand, going beyond a purely cognitive dimension does not mean that dialogue ignores cognition. On the contrary, the core of a dialogical life is a cognitive orientation and a willingness to learn from others. This orientation makes personal identity more vulnerable but only as long as one prefers a coherent but false life to a painful struggle against false presuppositions. What are precisely the non-cognitive elements that are to be contributed to action through dialogue? The first is what Ivan Turgenev famously called putting oneself in the second place—an attitude so clearly present in the Socratic dialogue. The second is the imaginative effort, something that cannot be implemented as easily as other methods of thought, but requires a lengthy training of empathy and interpretation.

Apart from the non-cognitive contributions to action structure, dialogue implies further consequences. First of all, dialogue makes it possible to look at the non-dialogical types of action from an existential, dialogical perspective. The first of these other types is the monological action (see Table 1). Building opinions on one's own presuppositions and remaining, at the same time, in the limits of one's own perspective is the essence of monologue. It may seem disagreeable as it involves an egocentric attitude and lack of criticism but, according to our concept, it is morally indifferent. Peirce wrote about this 'simple and direct' method of fixing beliefs:

The man feels that, if he only holds to his belief without weavering, it will be entirely satisfactory. Nor can it be denied that a steady and immovable faith yields great peace of mind. It may, indeed, give rise to inconveniences, as if a man should resolutely continue to believe that fire would not burn him, or that he would be eternally damned if he received his ingesta otherwise than through a stomach-pump. But then the man who adopts this method will not allow that its inconveniences are greater than its advantages. He will say, "I hold steadfastly to the truth, and the truth is always wholesome." And in many cases it may very well be that the pleasure he derives from his calm faith overbalances any inconveniences resulting from its deceptive character. (Peirce 1992: 116).

Table 1

The Dimensions of Action

		The interactional dimension	
		Egocentric perspective	**Taking the perspective of the other**
The inferential dimension (direction of inference)	**Taking the presupposition for granted**	Monologue	Submission/transference
	Critical examination of the presupposition	Withdrawal	Dialogue

People appreciate monological action for its simplicity and for the sense of self-confidence and self-confirmation. Besides, monological conduct may validate a personal faith and, taking the form of charismatic leadership, may mobilize others to action.

Nonetheless, neither dialogue nor monologue are the most common types of action. It is submission and transference that play a much more significant role in everyday life

and shape social relations. Both involve sticking to certain presuppositions combined with taking the perspective of the other. In case of submission the actor overtakes the presuppositions of the other, and in case of transference she projects her own presuppositions onto the other. According to this concept, submission, as well as dialogue, is possible due to the actor's ability to 'take the attitude of the other.' Both in submission and transference, the presuppositions of action remain intact. These kinds of action are most common because it is relatively easy to attribute one's own opinions to others as well as to rely on what one finds in others. However, both strategies may lead to failures and disappointments. Hence, in each society there is room for a further existential form of action which has been traditionally called withdrawal. From the dialogical perspective, withdrawal is practiced by those who undermine their own presuppositions without taking the perspective of the other. Consequently, withdrawal may result in inaction or inertia but may also be a beginning of a new quest for meaning (Lepenies 1998).

Dialogue, in the sense proposed here, should not be mistaken for an ethical principle or ideal. It is not meant normatively at all. What I want to suggest is that, as long as an ethical evaluation of action takes place, it is never to be done on the grounds of its dialogical or non-dialogical character. There is no reason to doubt that monologue, withdrawal, submission, and transference may play a very positive role in both individual life and social development. The value-neutrality of the proposed typology does no harm to the idea that dialogue is a sort of action individual actors would probably prefer after experiencing an existential turn. However, it may also bring consequences which are unwelcome. A sociological commentator and, at the same time, a vehement critic of Plato, Alvin Gouldner, aptly remarks that dialogue may pose at least as many problems as it brings advantages (1965: 379–387). For example, it may make people less faithful and more prone to doubts. Dialogue can also end up in eristic struggles and undermine social order. Furthermore, it requires a lot of time and training so that it probably cannot be suggested as a common practice. It may also turn out to be unsuccessful or bring about new forms of withdrawal, submission or monologue. As well as other forms of action, dialogue is closely connected with specific social roles and situations.

A good example is the role of explorer in Florian Znaniecki's sociology. In *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge* (1958 [1940]) Znaniecki juxtaposes the early 'technologists' and 'sages.' The former provided early authorities and communities with practical knowledge but had to deal with the skepticism of the social circles of her role as soon as she tried to wage theoretical inquiries. The latter represent an authority in their conflicts with antagonist groups and reinforce its legitimacy with intellectual tools. The structural contexts of both roles indicate the potential problems of dialogue between their executors. As the technologist cannot effortlessly abandon his strictly practical point of view, the sage is not ready to put his presuppositions into question. The role of a 'scholar,' the third one named by Znaniecki, also exhibits monological traits as it originates from closed sacral schools where sophisticated deductive systems of knowledge had been secured from becoming transparent and accessible. It is only the 'explorer' who looks for new facts that would revolutionize the existing knowledge. As opposed to the three other roles, the explorer does not use standardized methods nor strict procedures. She is more interested in discovery than in justification and defense of an old theory. Znaniecki asserts that 'there

is no logic of creative thought' and that the career of an explorer begins with the satis-
faction of finding new facts and the adventure of discovering 'unpredictable things.' Criti-
cizing John Dewey's implicit reduction of all scientific activity to 'technological thought'
Znaniecki emphasizes that it is only the explorer who overcomes the immanent problem
of the technologist's role, that is, the inability to abstract from a practical frame of refer-
ence. Moreover, by creating new knowledge, the explorer is also at odds with the sages
and scholars, and overcomes the fundamental weakness of their roles: sticking to the once
established presuppositions. The explorer is oriented at falsification of commonly shared
theories, but is driven by curiosity rather than doubt. The latter is only a consequence of her
primary need of truth. In order to pursue her vocation, the explorer, as Znaniecki explicitly
asserts, has to go beyond the expectations of her circles and runs the risk of being labeled as
a threat to fixed beliefs. But what are the 'circles' of her 'role'? No institutionalized circles
of the explorer's role are ever possible, since the essence of exploration is to disappoint
established expectations. However, it is probable that outstanding scholars and technolo-
gists, by disappointing the demands of their circles, enter the path of exploration. Thus, the
explorer undermines the adequacy of the very concept of the role Znaniecki tailors for all
'men of knowledge.' What lies behind the discrepancy between the explorer and other ex-
perts mentioned in the book is not the institutionalized role she takes, but the kind of action
she performs within the role and the process of transcending it. As long as the explorer's
activity abandons the entrenched perspectives of the social circle and questions the presup-
positions she represented herself before letting curiosity be her only guide, the action may
be called dialogical. If being dialogical overcomes the very essence of what social roles are,
the existential perspective seems to explain social life on a deeper level than the structural
approach does. On the basis of the existential approach to action, Znaniecki's concept of the
explorer may be also better supported in the face of arguments formulated by Werner Stark
from the angle of the sociology of knowledge. Stark's assertion that 'Znaniecki considers
knowledge in itself as a realm altogether divorced from social reality, as the possession of
and participation in a truth' (Stark 1958: 28) is not relevant to the way Znaniecki explains
the roles of technologists, sages, and scholars who either solve practical problems or culti-
vate inherited knowledge. As far as Znaniecki does not take into account the origin of the
technological problems and knowledge developed by the scholars, he cannot be accused
of sharing any idealistic theory of forms. It is only his concept of the explorer that signals
a divorce from a Durkheimian sociology of knowledge. Although the concept may be, in
fact, interpreted as Platonic, it is not a Platonism in the sense of a theory of forms, that can
be inferred from his concept, but a theory of dialogical action referring to Socratic qualities
in role-transcending actions.

Dialogical Sociology

The existential concept of action, roughly sketched in the preceding section, is intended to
reveal the existential level of human life and its influence on the way social structures shape
our decisions and become problematic. As opposed to rationalistic and normativistic mod-
els of action, the existential concept does not presuppose any guiding principle of action

that could not be questioned and examined. Thus, it responds to the theses of contingency and uncertainty in a confirmative and radical way. It claims that both the sociologist and the social actors are basically ignorant and, while engaged in a quest for the truth, fix their beliefs in a rather adaptive way.

Second, the existential concept supposes any established knowledge to be undergoing a continuous process of examination which takes partially unpredictable directions. In that respect the theory shares the basic idea of pragmatism.

Third, the existential concept walks in the footsteps of Socrates and Charles Sanders Peirce by explaining thinking as a social activity that cannot be separated from social situations and existential decisions of the parties involved. The quest for truth cannot be separated from interaction and interaction cannot be conceptualized outside of the question of what is good, involved in each individual action. Thus, any interactional structure builds up around this personal quest. As Richard Robinson puts it: 'The Socratic elenchus is a very personal affair, in spite of Socrates' ironical declarations that it is an impersonal search for the truth. If the ulterior end of the elenchus is to be attained, it is essential that the answerer himself be convinced, and quite indifferent whether anyone else is. […] The art of elenchus is to find premises believed by the answerer and yet entailing the contrary of his thesis.' (Robinson 1953: 15). The Socratic method implies, furthermore, that knowledge is ultimately rooted in individual intuitions about what the good is and how to learn about it. The deep personal knowledge, apart from being difficult to recollect and to interpret, is being distorted by an incessant and inevitable process of objectification. This interpretation of Platonism has been formulated by Cornelius Castoriadis with reference to Kierkegaard's concept of subjectivity:

'The creator who produces a work alienates to it a bit of his own being, loses in it some of his substance, more than what he gains therein in the way of immortality. And this is so not only because I lose [je perds] my life in becoming lost [en m'abimant] in my work, but also because my work is less true than what I am in the faculties of my thought, of my living thinking activity—that idea is already there both in the passage from the Statesman and in the Phaedrus's critique of the written, and it is found throughout Plato. (…) The truth is in discourse and not in the written; the truth is in the knowledge and the will [le savoire et le vouloir] of the royal man and not in the laws' (Castoriadis 2002: 122–123).

Fourth, the existential concept of action, proposed here, interprets dialogue as one among five different types of action which may all be interpreted in terms of one's attitude towards himself in the context of interaction, and towards one's own and the other's presuppositions which constitute the meaning of action. Since all of these kinds of action may be found in the lives of each actor, the theory makes it possible to examine the different combinations and sequences in which these actions take place, and objectifications they tend to produce.

A concept very closed to what I call a dialogical one has been explicitly proposed by an American classic Albion Small. He assigns to the sociologist the difficult task of investigating things from the perspective of human life as a whole. By combining the demand of comparing respective presuppositions of different social sciences with the principle of taking a holistic-personal point of view, Small implicitly advocates a dialogical theory of action (Small 1906: 28).

For the most part, sociology is not following Small's line of thought. It takes seriously the claim to be a synthetic science, but fails to assume a holistic perspective. According to

the dominant opinion, sociology has to dedicate itself to a specific subject, regardless of the fact that there were other social sciences as economics, anthropology, history etc. all of which were concerned with the same reality. The development of empirical research is paralleled by an intense theoretical debate that gives birth to numerous approaches which vary with regard to the question of what should be the basic task of sociological research. The differentiation is partly rooted in the discrepancy between Durkheim's and Weber's visions, clearly discernible in their disjunctive definitions of sociology and the very fact that they never quoted each other. The pivotal attempt at a synthesis, offered by Talcott Parsons (1968 [1937]), resulted in an enormous fragmentation of the sociological theory. New approaches mushrooming especially in the sixties, elaborated on certain themes of Parsons' edifice (Alexander 1987) and developed a critique of him or drew on classics who have not been taken seriously in Parsons' early work, in particular on the American pragmatists. The diversity of the American sociological scene and the still present tension between the Weberian and Durkheimian perspectives (Boudon 1993: 37), occasioned a rise of new synthetic theories. The complexity of the discipline, although only partially reflecting the complexity of social life itself, inspired several authors to propose abstract theories modeled on the Parsonian idea of synthesis. The new principles proposed as alternatives to the 'voluntary action,' for example 'structuration' (Anthony Giddens), 'general vision of change' (Alain Touraine), 'social systems' (Niklas Luhmann) or 'communicative action' (Jürgen Habermas), implicitly claimed the other theories to be inferior. This common misconception about theoretical diversity has been recently criticized from more open and self-critical perspectives (Camic, Joas 2004: 5).

Donald Levine (1995) claims that there are four major narratives on the history of sociology, all of which try to account for the diversity of sociological theories. The positivist narrative assigns sociology a narrow task of following the prototype of natural sciences. The positivists view social sciences as a cumulative and progressive activity including careful collection of empirical data, their systematic analysis and, finally, formulation of explanatory middle-range theories. All theories that are not empirically grounded are condemned as nonscientific or lacking justification. The second, pluralist narrative, is a reaction to the pluralism of theories and paradigms which do not fit into the positivist story but still claim to be a legitimate part of sociology. Pitirim Sorokin, Don Martindale, and Shmuel Eisenstadt, to mention the most prominent pluralists, recognize the variety of perspectives and try to legitimate each of them in their specific disciplinary division of labor. Pluralists acknowledge the coexistence of numerous approaches and concepts and explain such a situation as normal and desirable. They argue that reality is much more complex than any language and, as a consequence, they condemn any universalist explanation to be inadequate and one-dimensional.

Levine explicitly distances himself from the positivist approach by criticizing its 'mindless empiricism' (1995: 34). With regard to pluralism, he supports its sensitivity and awareness of different interpretive frameworks and incommensurable presuppositions, but is critical of the diversity of typologies and interpretations of the classics. On the other hand, he appreciates Shmuel Eisenstadt's attempt to order the incommensurable theories along the lines of their contributions to the discipline and their immanent 'openings' (Levine 1995: 31). Since Levine seems to align himself with the pluralist narrative in several re-

spects, it is relatively difficult to see any substantial difference between pluralism and his own 'dialogical' approach. Perhaps the difference lies in Levine's demand to seek exogenous factors explaining the genesis and recognition of each of the considered sociological theories. However it is precisely that demand and the expectation to be aware of the context of each sociological statement that constitutes the contextualist narrative, the fourth one on Levine's list. Although he rejects this narrative by suggesting that it pays too little attention to the substantive content of sociological productions, Levine himself gives a contextualist scent to his own concept. For his idea of dialogue combines a pluralist recognition of the multitude of perspectives with the contextualist agenda. Due to this rather eclectic concept of dialogue, the meaning of what Levine calls 'dialogical' becomes more clear only as opposed to the synthetic narrative, which is the main target of his critique.

While analyzing different national traditions of social sciences, Levine, surprisingly, seems to deny the real pluralism declared in the first part of his book. In his own narrative, Aristotle's idea of social sciences is thoroughly ethical and follows from the author's philosophy of nature. Aristotle considers human passions and souls as naturally given, but virtues are for him no more than products of habits, a fruit of consistent and wise socialization. The success or failure of the latter may be objectively measured because the goals of human activity are also considered as naturally given. Hence, according to Levine, Aristotle provides a basis to divide sciences into theoretical, practical, and productive ones. The social sciences are assigned the distinctive role of creating virtuous members of a just community (polis). Following Levine, this attractive idea of social science has been challenged only by Thomas Hobbes, who consequently extended his atomistic vision of nature onto the realm of human beings and explained society as a field of interacting forces. Hobbes denied both the existence of natural goals, social dispositions in human beings, and any chance to develop virtues through positive motivation. According to Levine, Hobbes' mechanistic vision was aimed against Aristotle and constituted the sole turning point in the whole history of social sciences. History after Hobbes is explained by Levine as a gradual correction and elaboration on the Hobbesian position or, on the contrary, as a development of isolated thoughts of Aristotle. Hence, if Levine's own narrative is to be followed, modern social theorists elaborated on selected concepts which they found in Aristotle, or unconsciously developed these concepts by responding to the social contexts of their own work. For instance, the French tradition was mostly interested in the concept of community and social integration while the German, starting with Kant, has elaborated on the idea of free will and individual creation of values.

Levine's own narrative demonstrates, in my opinion, that he does not take pluralism nor dialogue seriously. What he really does is to insist on an incurable contradiction between the Aristotelian and the Hobbesian vision. In addition, Levine explicitly advocates the Aristotelian tradition and promotes its reconstruction through a productive combination of functionalism, voluntarism, and the Marxist appreciation of nature as potentiality (1995: 119–120). By characterizing numerous modern theories as masked partial developments of Aristotelianism Levine establishes, in fact, a new synthetic vision. Perhaps he would have ended up with a different, existential concept of dialogue if he had begun his historical overview with Plato and not with Aristotle, who was one of Plato's most vehement opponents.

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