

Towards a theory of social processes: a translation¹

ABSTRACT

A theory of social processes must diagnose and explain those long-term and unplanned, yet structured and directional trends in the development of social and personality structures that constitute the infrastructure of what is commonly called 'history'. The reception of such a theoretical approach is hampered by the self-image of contemporary sociology as a discipline primarily concerned with the present and devoted to research on short-term changes and causal relationships within given social systems. This self-image results from a problematic division of intellectual labour between history and sociology, but also from sociology's increasing involvement in social practice, i.e. bureaucratically controlled social planning. While contributing to such planning, sociologists ignore the long-term, unplanned developments which produce the conditions for the present-day practice of planning and in which all planned social development is entangled. Complementary processes of functional differentiation, social integration, and civilization are strands of this complex long-term development. Its dynamics require further exploration.

KEYWORDS: Civilizing process, history, development, evolution, progress

I

The two very different ancestors of sociology, Comte and Marx, attempted to break free from the fables of classical European philosophy. They each did this in their own way. Comte pointed out that the classical philosophical idea of an eternal reason, an unchanging mind supposedly shared by people in all historical periods and places, was a reified abstraction, a fable. He tried to show that human thinking changes in the course of time, that in people's social life it goes – just like that social life, like human society – through a specific, empirically verifiable series of stages. His 'law' of the three stages of thought simplifies the observable facts, but it indicates the direction in which one must go to break through the static approach of classical European philosophy. With Comte, the eternal opposition between a reasoning subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge quite clearly becomes a social process. The sequence of types of thought is embedded in the sequence of stages of social development.

Marx acquired the idea of the development of thought from Hegel. In contrast to Comte, however, Hegel conceived human intellectual activity in philosophical terms, as if it developed independently of all other human functions and needs, that is, independently of human society. He saw the trajectory of human intellectual functions, using the uncritically inherited notion of 'spirit', as an autonomous development and essentially the hegemonic driving force behind all other aspects of social change. As we know, Marx took a very decisive step on the road from philosophy to sociology: he corrected the Hegelian idea of the hegemonic position of 'spirit' as the primary driving force behind all changes in human society, by attributing this hegemony to the production and distribution of goods for the satisfaction of the most elementary needs of life. With this step Marx tore himself loose from the one-sidedness of the whole philosophical enterprise. People whose speciality is the use of the intellect, pure mental labour, are only too inclined in their contemplations to regard thought in itself, pure reason, as the source and origin of all other aspects of human life. It was indeed decisive for the transition from philosophy to sociology to break with this reduction of humanity to 'mental' activities and perceptions and to start instead from a picture not only of people in the singular, but also of people in the plural, of human societies, which includes their relationships with each other and also their bodily nature, the need to sustain themselves and to work for their sustenance.

That Marx, in the exuberance of the battle against this one-sided image of humans reduced to thought and perception, overshot the mark and treated the social satisfaction of elementary human needs, with concepts like 'economic' and 'material', in turn as the basis for all other functions in society, can perhaps be understood as an example of what he himself postulated as the 'dialectic of historical movement'. It was a decisive step forward to anchor the economic activities of humans in a theoretical model of social development. But it was a one-sided exaggeration of a valid critique of classical European philosophy for Marx in turn to grant a virtually absolute autonomy to the specialized economic functions of a society in relation to other social functions, to present the inner dynamic of this specialized social function as the hegemonic driving force behind all social changes and to regard other areas of social functioning, under the label 'superstructure', as relations secondary to the economic sphere. It is not difficult to see that humans are unable to satisfy their elementary physical needs without orientating themselves in the world through thought and knowledge, and that they are unable so to orientate themselves without satisfying their elementary needs. In other words, Marx's dialectical exuberance gave rise to a 'chicken-and-egg problem'.

Despite the differences between the ways Comte and Marx realized the break with the long and powerful philosophical tradition and the transition to a sociological tradition, they shared one characteristic feature. Both unambiguously placed the problem of *change* in human society, or in other words, the immanent order of the sequence of societal stages at the centre

of their research programmes. There is no doubt that in both cases the shattering experience of a particular change, the experience of the French Revolution, played a decisive role in making their approach to social science more radically dynamic. The problem of further, future social change thus entered human consciousness more powerfully than it ever had before. But this also reinforced the realization – in Comte as well as Marx – that current social relations are only one moment in a long-term process, which leads from the past through the present and beyond it into the future. The problem of this process lay correspondingly at the heart of both their intellectual labours.

II

The concern with the stages of humanity was not novel in itself. The idea has a long history. But for centuries people saw human development as a decline. Paradise lay in the past. The golden era was followed by the silver, the iron age by many wars. At best people dreamt of a return to paradise lost, of the return to a better past, of the renaissance of antiquity.²

Apart from some anticipatory forms in antiquity itself, it was quite novel to approach humanity as an advance to a better future instead of a decline from a better past. From about the sixteenth century onwards there was a slow move away from the traditional placement of a high value on the past and being orientated to its authority, to a valorization of the present and the future. The progress movement – interlinked polyphonically with an ever-present counter-movement – reached its apex roughly between 1750 and 1850. A complementary counter-movement then gradually gained the upper hand, at least in the advanced industrial nation-states. The belief, often enthusiastically held, that human development must, with immanent necessity, advance towards a better present or future, towards progress, was followed in a sort of dialectical swing of the pendulum by the no less enthusiastic condemnation of this faith in progress as an expression of a naive optimism. The mere use of the concept of progress fell into disrepute. Especially in the twentieth century, there arose widespread agreement in the relatively more advanced industrial countries that the hitherto dominant faith in the inevitable improvement in human living conditions both through the expansion of knowledge and the actual course of human development had been refuted.

But the wholesale condemnation of the belief in progress blocked access to a range of sociological problems which are of considerable significance both for an understanding of the period dominated by the belief in progress itself and for the following period, in which the opposing voices – the chorus of pessimists – gradually gained the upper hand. Most of these questions lie outside the framework of this discussion. But perhaps one can point out, in passing, that in the twentieth century, particularly in the industrialized countries which consider themselves the most advanced, people

have concerned themselves more with the erroneousness of the belief in progress than with the question, under which social conditions in the preceding century could such novel idea as human progress appear at all and become dominant for such a length of time? What social process, what change in power relations was expressed in this idea? The belief in the lawfulness of social progress was one of the earliest completely secular belief systems. How can we explain the fact that people, instead of attributing the deterioration or improvement of human living conditions to a superhuman providence, began believing more in an equally natural lawfulness of social development which would necessarily bring about an improvement in the conditions of social life? Were there demonstrable experiences which pointed in this direction? Was the idea of a purely this-worldly progress simply an expression of the wishes and ideals of particular social groups? Or a mixture of experience and ideals? And to which social transformations, which changes in experiences and ideals can one attribute the fact that, particularly later in the twentieth century, the chorus of opposing voices gained the upper hand precisely in the relatively advanced industrial nation-states?

When one moves from these questions to examine the dominant self-assessment of this century by its advocates, one encounters a peculiar paradox. On the one hand, the twentieth century is an epoch of the greatest experiments and innovations. In this period people have become far more systematically, in larger numbers, over larger areas and generally also more successfully concerned with progress. Much of what people in earlier times only dreamed of has become 'do-able'. Human knowledge – not only about interconnections in the non-human, natural world, but also about people themselves, on the individual as well as social level – is far more extensive than in the past. The conscious, planned concern with improvement of the social order and human living conditions – as inadequate as it is – has never been greater than it is today.

But, on the other hand, one simultaneously encounters a deepening mood of doubt about the value of such progress. Its advantages are accepted and its dangers feared. Few question the explanation of the former; we simply take them for granted. The latter stand sharply outlined in the foreground; they are what we seek to explain. The incessant stream of innovations makes those affected more uncertain; the increasing rate of change reinforces their desire for peaceful havens and symbols of permanence. But above all we search for deliverance from the incessant conflicts between human groups – whether we pretend everything could be peaceful and harmonious if only the others, the disturbers of the peace, the agitators, did not subversively threaten the good life, or whether we see the remedy lying in the overthrow of existing power relations and the establishment of a different order from which we expect greater peace, harmony and absence of conflict. In this case, too, it is only others who are seen as responsible for the mounting conflicts. The unintended contribution of our own group or ourselves, our mutual share in responsibility for the

conflicts and correspondingly also for the unplanned processes which stand behind them, lie beyond the horizon. It is not easy to grasp that it is precisely the relative reduction in power differentials in many sectors of humanity – no matter how enormous these differentials remain – which increases the intensity of tensions and the frequency of open conflicts. For open group tensions and conflicts are not at their greatest and most frequent where the inequality in the power resources of interdependent groups is very large and inescapable, but precisely where there begins to take place some improvement in the position of less powerful groups. The twentieth century is a time of increasing unplanned changes in this direction. Here too the paradox: today there is a movement towards the reduction of inequality between outsiders and the established, whether it be workers and entrepreneurs, the colonized and colonial powers, women and men. In human terms that is a progression. But at the same time this movement makes its own contribution to an increase in social and personal tensions and conflicts, which increase people's suffering and raise doubts about the value of their striving for progress.

The same holds for the shifts and fluctuations in the power differentials between a number of state societies all over the world, for example between Russia, America and China. The smaller these differentials become and the greater the economic and military interdependencies, the greater too the fuel for tensions, the endless trials of strength and the manoeuvring over the slightest strategic advantage in case there is another war. Here we again encounter the immanently contradictory character of the developmental structures concerned: the desired progress has undesirable consequences. Like the concept of progress, the concept of humanity is also weighed down by its usage during the Enlightenment and in rationalist idealism. In that period the concept 'humanity' expressed an ideal wafting high above the real world, and the echo of this usage still rings in peoples' ears today. In the period of reaction against this enlightenment ideal the concept 'humanity' was correspondingly made taboo. It disappeared from the vocabulary of people who wanted to be taken seriously, including social scientists. In the meantime, however, it has become highly reality-congruent to speak of humanity, because separate human societies in all parts of the world have become increasingly interdependent, and this trend will in all probability intensify in the future. But because the earlier idealizing conception of a harmonious humanity still clings to this concept, it remains extremely difficult to use the word 'humanity' in the most appropriate way, even though it has the advantage that the situation of human beings in the twentieth century can only be understood and explained when one approaches it from the perspective of all interdependent human societies, and not that of a single society. In this sense, 'humanity' means a structure involving both interdependence and tensions: precisely because the interdependencies have grown, the fuel for tensions and conflicts has become more universal. The feeling of helplessness in relation to the potential catastrophes accompanying this increase in interdependencies, and to the

intensification of the tensions throughout humanity, has also become correspondingly greater.

In these cases, too, it is difficult to achieve a more object-adequate orientation precisely because we are accustomed to seeing all tensions and conflicts exclusively from the perspective of an involved person or group. And this habit is further reinforced by the fact that human groups simply demand of their members that they *must* see things from one side, from their own side. Consequently, we also usually explain unplanned and unintended social structures and processes in terms of the mistakes and faults of others, the opponents to whom we are bound. At the level of human society, then, we rarely transcend black-and-white voluntaristic explanations.

III

We used to, and sometimes still today, explain what we now understand simply as 'natural events', such as thunder and lightning, drought and flood, illness and lunar eclipses, voluntaristically in terms of the wilful actions, intentions and plans of living beings, whether human or super-human. Similarly today it remains common to explain human social events simply in terms of wilful human actions, intentions and plans. At first glance this may seem sensible and perhaps even self-evident. It is obvious to consider that, on the human-social level of the universe it is adequate to rely on a voluntaristic type of explanation of phenomena which over the centuries people have painfully learnt to be inadequate on the physical level. For social events, and particularly transformations in human societies, are very clearly related to wilful human actions and plans. The inadequacy of voluntaristic explanations of the relations of physical nature arises from the fact that they have nothing to do with wilful acts. The inadequacy of voluntaristic explanations of social relationships, in contrast, is based on the fact that structures and processes emerge out of the interweaving of the intended acts and plans of many people, which none of the people involved in them willed or planned. To examine and explain such structures and processes of interweaving is one of the central tasks of the social sciences and particularly sociology. The process of civilization is one of these processes, that of state formation is another. We can hardly perceive them, and certainly not study them as processes if we only see the data through which they manifest themselves from the perspective of the people involved. We can explain them neither voluntaristically, simply through acts of will, nor in the framework of the natural sciences, simply through measurements or mechanical cause-effect relationships. At this level of science one is concerned with studying types of relationship for which one has to develop different types of theory, concepts and methods of investigation. This is one of the reasons for the difficulties which impede the reception of such studies.

At the same time, however, such considerations enable us to gain, from

another angle, access to an understanding of what I earlier characterized as the paradox of the twentieth century. Today we can hardly imagine the difficulties people had to struggle with in their concern for the understanding and explanation of non-human natural events, before they were gradually able to develop out of the dominant voluntaristic, magical-mythical symbols of speech and thought others which we now term 'physical' or 'natural scientific'. This development of humanly-created and correspondingly learnable symbols, which simultaneously serve as means of orientation, control and communication, and their gradually improved correspondence to the factual relationships which they symbolize, is an example of what we understand as progress. But such progress towards greater 'object adequacy' occurs very unevenly at different levels of knowledge, as has already been indicated for the earlier, very generalized character of voluntaristic types of explanation. The human capacity to develop more adequate symbols of orientation and control in the field of non-human natural relationships has developed much more quickly than the capacity to develop equally adequate symbols of orientation and control at the level of the universe humans form themselves. So, for example, lightning and atomic fission can be relatively adequately explained, but wars and other social conflicts to a far lesser extent.

This unplanned disparity in the development of human means of orientation on the physical and social levels has far-reaching consequences. It is responsible, for example, for too sharp a distinction between 'nature' and 'society', which today seems self-evident. Certainly the peculiarity of human societies arises ultimately from the *nature* of human beings. But today it is often overlooked that the extraordinary sharpness of the distinction between humans and nature made in contemporary thinking originated in the unplanned disparity between the levels of development of the natural and social sciences. So, in the twentieth century people have frequently blamed their cultural discontents on the development of natural science and technology, which led to the discovery of atomic weapons and environmental pollution, instead of addressing themselves to the societies which they form with each other. Without inter-state conflicts, which are for people today barely easier to explain and control than epidemics in the Middle Ages, the development of knowledge about the nature of the atom and the corresponding technology would have followed a different route from the development of armaments. The pollution of the earth is similarly not a natural scientific problem, but a social and therefore social scientific one.

In the final analysis, it is to the unplanned contradiction between the constant advances of scientifically acquired means of orientation, including the corresponding chances for control in the field of non-human nature, and the relative backwardness in the development of the human world, that we must to a large extent attribute the increasingly strong expressions of doubt about the value of all progress, and particularly progress in science and technology. Here we again come across a characteristic defence mechanism: we

attack others, in this case the exponents of natural science and technology, about things for which we are jointly responsible. We persist with purely voluntaristic explanation of the course of social development, and thus remain incapable of explaining the unplanned and unintended social processes within which we are entangled, and of developing more adequate means of orientation and control for them.

IV

Enough has been said in this regard to throw light on the paradox of the concurrence of an intense concern with progress which has been institutionalized more than ever before, and a non-institutionalized but no less intense fear of progress. The concurrence of such contradictory tendencies is part of the structural characteristics of contemporary societies. Whatever can be said about their explanation, they are certainly connected with the fact that today, precisely in the more advanced and developed countries, a strongly negative attitude towards the notion of social progress and long-term social development is evident.

Similarly, one finds that the concept of social development has become discredited in the social sciences, too. Just as the concept of 'humanity' has remained disreputable because it was used in an earlier period as a symbol for a secular theology, the concept of social development has also remained disreputable because it is associated with a faith in law-like progress. At best the concept of social development is used in relation to the planned and therefore relatively short-term changes in poorer societies. Even then it is usually used somewhat one-sidedly only in the sense of economic development. Other developmental problems such as the corresponding changes in people, the civilizing change in personality structures, or in processes of state formation, such as the integration of tribes into centralized states, are certainly inseparable in practice from those of planned economic development, but in this use of the concept of development they usually remain outside consideration or at best they appear in plans for economic development as disrupting factors. The concept of development continues to be used in this limited, voluntaristic sense, in relation to less developed countries. Societies of this sort can, it seems, develop in the direction of economically more developed countries. In relation to the latter we even speak half-bashfully of their 'evolution', thus blurring the distinction between irreversible biological evolution in Darwin's sense and the development of human societies, which takes place in the framework of the same biological species and which, under certain identifiable conditions, can be partly or completely reversed. In general, however, we avoid applying the concept 'development' to these developed societies. Instead of a development, they are usually only granted a history.

This obscures central problems in the course of the long-term development, not only of these advanced societies, but of humanity itself: problems

such as, for example, that of how we can explain that in the social life of one and the same biological species such immense changes can take place as those which led from small, relatively loosely organized nomadic hordes to relatively highly integrated industrial nation-states, or from the use of simple stone tools and weapons to a highly mechanized technology of production and war. In the human sciences of non-communist countries, particularly in their sociology, the diagnosis and explanation of such long-term structural transformations are rarely discussed. In the communist countries they threatened to congeal into dogmatism. In the former, access is denied to the explanation of long-term changes in social and personality structure by constructing the investigation as 'historical'; then it is put on the same level as the form of historiography which dominates these societies, whose representatives see history simply as the unstructured comings and goings of people. A view of history as a structured change of society in a particular direction did survive in the latter, but it was accompanied at the same time by the idea that these changes were leading in a law-like way towards the realization of their own ideals.

It is one of the tasks of the theory of civilizing processes to return the problem of the long-term development of social and personality structures, without any pre-emptive dogmatism, to a new level at the centre of social scientific discussion. Such an enterprise, however, encounters particular problems in communication. Their discussion is significant not only for an understanding of the difficulties which accompany the reception of the theory of civilizing processes itself, but also for an understanding of problems in the reception of scientific innovations as well as the problem of scientific development itself. No more needs to be said here about the theoretical problems the investigation of which can contribute to an understanding of the reception of scientific innovations. But it may be useful to draw attention to some of their aspects and briefly to introduce a few basic concepts necessary to illuminate them.

v

History and sociology are today treated as independent academic disciplines. Their representatives strive accordingly to achieve and maintain a high degree of independence for their discipline and for themselves. Every discipline has its hall of fame, its own conventions and standards of theory and research. Certainly, neither of the two academic disciplines is completely unified; sociology in particular is currently very disparate and fragmented. But unified or not, each of the two disciplines has its own establishment, or even two or more competing establishments, whose representatives each prepare models of method and problem-setting in research, and also have considerable influence over appointments, considerable control over the discipline's journals and thus over the selection of material for publication.

The institutional segregation of the two academic disciplines and their respective establishments carries over in a particular way into the accepted ideas in their teaching and research. One often gets the impression that people assume that the objects of the different academic disciplines, in this case history and society, exist as independently of each other as the disciplines history and sociology. On closer social scientific inspection it is easy enough to see that this disciplinary specialization on the part of historians and sociologists concerns at best a division of labour – a division of labour in the study of distinct, but indivisible aspects of the same subject area: changing human associations and the people who make them up. But the peculiar structure of university organization, with the built-in power and status struggles of the various academic disciplines, makes it appear in this case, as in others, as if the organizationally separated theory and research of specialist scientific groups is based on the partitioned existence of their objects of research. On closer inspection it quickly becomes clear that precisely the reverse is true: it is the scientific organization and particularly the carefully protected independence of each establishment authorizing a discipline's teaching and research which is expressed in the idea of the independent existence of the subject areas concerned.

In other words: the currently widespread conception of the relation between 'history' and 'society' as two independently existing subject areas is a projection of the social organization of knowledge in this field, and thus a scientific and ideological myth. Historians usually assume that they examine 'history', without explaining, at the same level of abstraction, whose history it is they are studying. If they did that, they would have to say that it is the history of particular human associations, or perhaps humanity, in any case always the history of 'societies', which constitutes the framework of their studies. For their part sociologists today usually assume, as if it were self-evident, that they examine all possible aspects of human societies. But in reality the development of their discipline has led to the fact that they increasingly limit themselves to the study of societies contemporary to themselves and particularly their own national societies. At the same time, however, many sociologists try to derive general law-like principles from such present-centred evidence. While a considerable proportion of last century's sociological theorists concerned themselves with process-theories covering the past, the present and equally the possible future, their current successors concern themselves with a type of law-like theory which, like classical physics, ignores all changes in the course of unrepeatable time. They are usually constituted so as to claim validity for societies in all times and places, even if they frequently relate only to contemporary societies. The fact that the form of human association in contemporary societies follows seamlessly from a continuous sequence of earlier forms of association, and that these contemporary societies, together with the sociological studies of them, will themselves shortly be part of the past and 'history', that in other words the present is only a brief moment in a long process, accordingly seems irrelevant for this type of sociology.

In summary, we can say that we encounter here a remarkable phenomenon in the development of both disciplines. It is not only that sociology has become increasingly focused on present-centred, history on past-centred areas of research. This type of division of labour has further encouraged the tendency to equate the 'historical' with past-centred, the 'sociological' with present-centred, and accordingly to also think about the 'present' and the 'past' of human societies in this way, as if they themselves have a separate and independent existence.

VI

The use of the concepts 'history' and 'historical' as expressions which relate specifically to the past – whether of societies, issues, events or individuals – and which simultaneously have the negative meaning of 'not belonging to the present', is today very widespread. It seems almost self-evident that 'history' can have only this and no other meaning. Correspondingly, today studies of the civilizing process and other long-term processes are frequently classified as 'historical sociology', since the evidence for such studies is to a large extent drawn from past epochs, while contemporary sociologists are inclined to regard the present as their normal work terrain.

Now it is not difficult to see that such a division between past-focused and present-focused studies can never be properly realized in practice. The simple fact that historians themselves also undertake present-focused 'historical' research which can be clearly distinguished from equally present-centred sociological studies, suggests that the reason for the distinctions between the two disciplines lies less in the specialization of the two research groups, in which one is concerned with the past, the other with the present, than in the above-mentioned distinction between their organizational and research traditions, which is largely determined by the desire for mutual independence. The inadequacy of the separation of present- and past-centred research is no less clear within sociology and the social sciences themselves. The self-understanding of sociologists as representatives of a primarily present-focused science and the corresponding restriction of their scientific horizon is very recent. It can be explained, on the one hand, by the increasing proximity of sociological studies to social practice, by the increase in governmental and other planning enterprises for which sociological studies are required as a basis. On the other hand, it can be explained by the spread and temporary dominance of American theories and methods of research in the sociological research and theory of many other countries, from about the middle of the twentieth century. Certainly before this time there was already a trend in this direction, but it was countered by another trend whose representatives did not regard the 'past' and 'present' of human societies as distinct and separable objects of research. They saw more or less clearly that a continuous interweaving of the generations – despite all upheavals, all revolutions and wars – links the past,

present and future of human societies with each other, and that therefore present and future societies cannot be understood and explained without reference to past societies. In these cases – and in fact in all others in which past, present and future are regarded as a diachronic continuum and not as if they were separate and reified objects – the concept ‘history’, too, does not have the meaning which dominates today; it is not primarily past-focused. Under such conditions the concept of ‘society’ is equally not statically present-focused. Although the trends run alongside each other, one can still identify quite clear periods in the development of sociology in which there is a quite strong or dominant interest in the problems of long-term social dynamics, social development or at least in the development of human societies, and others in which – as is the case today – the dominant interest is limited to the present. Only in the latter case is ‘history’ then identified with ‘the past’. In the former, ‘history’ is equated with a structured sequence of changes in the course of time, much as it is characterized by the concept of social development; empirical evidence from the past and present and evidence from more or less developed societies from the same period have equal weight in the construction of sociological theories.

When a specialized social science based on a relatively extensive empirical knowledge branched off from the broad stream of social philosophical reflections, it was initially dominated by an interest in social development, and thus also in social dynamics. This was clearly the case from the time of the young Turgot to that of Marx and Engels. Even for Durkheim and Max Weber there was no real division between past and present as research objects, even if in Weber’s case an interest in long-term societal development was no longer dominant. As far as one can tell, he and his circle recognized very clearly the relevance for understanding the present of studies of the past, and the relevance for understanding the past of studies of the present. It seems that Weber’s contemporaries did not identify his studies of the genesis of capitalism and its relationship to the rise of Protestant sects in earlier centuries as ‘historical sociology’. Today, in contrast, the scene has changed. As fields of research, social problems of the past and the present have to a very large extent been split off from each other. Whoever transcends this division and moves to a new level, becomes an outsider in contemporary debates. Here we have already arrived at the communication problems mentioned above. The problematic which underlies studies of long-term processes like the civilizing process fits neither with the currently dominant form of sociology nor with that of historical research. But understandably an attempt is made almost automatically to characterize studies of such processes with concepts which assign them to a position within the existing scientific schema. So they seem to be a sort of hybrid of two established academic disciplines, history and sociology.

But this is only the beginning of the difficulties. It has already been pointed out that the view of history as a social development which equally incorporates the past, the present and the future is nothing new.³ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the communist countries it

played a large, if not always a dominant role. In these cases, what is today referred to in non-communist countries as 'history' and 'society', as subject areas of two sharply differentiated and independent disciplines, was – and still is – regarded as belonging together. Both concepts refer equally, as, for example, the expression 'historical materialism' denotes, to the past, present and future. In this sense, present and future are no less 'historical' than the past, the latter no less the past of structured societies than the present. The meaning of concepts such as 'history' and 'society' depends, in other words, as much on the developmental stage of the human sciences as on the prevailing social belief systems in the societies concerned.

VII

Accordingly, two different conceptions of history and society, representing two different systems of theories and beliefs, have been in conflict with each other from around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to today. They can be characterized briefly as deterministic and anti-deterministic, or better, voluntaristic. In both cases the picture of history and society is a mixture of scientific knowledge – based on facts and testable findings – and secular myths and ideals, arbitrary concealments of historical and social aspects which do not correspond to the dominant social beliefs of the carrier group, and the discovery or exaggeration of others which do correspond to these beliefs. In the one case, for example, it is possible to prove scientifically that humanity has progressed since the Stone Age and in some senses is constantly progressing. The mythologization here consists in the belief that human society must develop towards progress as if it were a natural necessity, which simultaneously corresponds to the wishes and ideals of the groups holding to this belief. In the other case, it is possible to demonstrate and test scientifically the fact that the great developmental syntheses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – one or the other of which serves as the foundation of the current belief in progress and the corresponding image of societal development as determined – are at least in part no longer confirmed by the bodies of detailed knowledge which have grown enormously in the meantime. In the light of this knowledge they appear, if not as incorrect, at least as simplistic and one-sided theoretical syntheses. The solidity of the acquisition of more and more testable bodies of detailed knowledge serves in this case, perhaps not as the only, but in any case as one of the main supports for the claim to scientificity. Secular myth formation in this case consists – at least in the dominant form of historical research, but in part also in sociology – in regarding the reliability of the gathering of detailed knowledge, whether in the form of painstaking study of historical documents or careful statistical measurements, as sufficient legitimation for the scientific character of one's own methods. Without the constant interdependence of the development of bodies of detailed knowledge and synthesizing models, of empirical exploration and

theory, analysis and synthesis, the production of detailed knowledge, no matter how careful the method of production, remains uncertain, often enough misleading and scientifically irrelevant. In addition, it is simply not possible to be concerned with knowledge about particularities without simultaneously, at least tacitly and either as theory or belief, keeping in view their relationship with other particularities.

The voluntaristic conception of history which, in contrast, rejects all notions of long-term historical development, presents history, as was mentioned earlier, as a kaleidoscope of unique events, the chance comings and goings of single societies and persons or even mere ideas at the same, never-changing level of development. In the absence of a testable theory – particularly in the still-dominant type of political history which focuses on the actions of statesmen – the crucial link between the accumulation of carefully established particular events is established by the historian's connecting narrative. But this means of establishing a connection between events, based on documents and inevitably fragmentary, is usually determined to a very large extent by the attitude of the historian to current issues and particularly their participation in current power struggles. As current issues can change considerably from one generation to another, for the narrative historian it is nothing unusual that the conception of an epoch produced in one generation, which in its time is regarded as a masterpiece, gathers dust in libraries in the next; not just because new sources have come to light, but above all because the personal perspective from which the overarching narrative is written has changed in accordance with different current issues.

The reliance on a historiographical tradition which allows individual historians a great deal of latitude for personal hermeneutics in their narrative connection of carefully researched sources manifests itself, *inter alia*, in a deliberate avoidance of theory. A virtue is made of necessity. The proud rejection of theory of this type of historiography opens the floodgates for historical myth-making of all sorts. Thanks to this rejection history often becomes a veiled form of lofty propaganda for particular states, classes or other human groups. Specific philosophical myths have also developed in connection with this interpretation of history, such as the notion of history as a mere 'description of change' (Popper 1957: 53)⁴ or that of 'historical relativism', which corresponds to the conception of history as unordered comings and goings, always on the same level of development.

In sociology, on the other hand, alongside the specialists in the production of detailed knowledge, whether in the form of statistical measurements or case studies, there are certainly also specialists in the construction of theories. But currently theory-formation usually takes place with the help of law-like abstractions which – floating far too high above the experienced world – emphasize what is apparently eternal about societies, leaving the diachronic structure of social change in the dark. It lacks empirical reference and contact with the expanding bodies of detailed knowledge. These in turn suffer from the fact that they are advanced to a large extent with no theoretical compass. Correspondingly, sociological theories often remain

untestable and in many cases today have the character of philosophical myths or derivatives of one of our epoch's social belief systems.

The opposition between interpretations of history and society which I characterized briefly above as deterministic and voluntaristic, with all their variants and intermediary forms, is one of the recurrent polarities of our time. The theoretical models which arise from the study of processes of state-formation and civilization fit just as badly into this as into other standard polarities in contemporary thought and speech. Automatically, however, people constantly try to understand them in terms of these polarities. Corresponding to the powerful constraints exercised by the standard forms of thought and speech in any epoch on the people of that epoch, here too people seek to place these theories on one or the other side of these opposing interpretations of society and history. If they cannot be classified as 'historical sociology' in the sense of voluntaristic historiography, then they must, or so it seems, be regarded as historical sociology in the sense of the deterministic conception of history. And since the representative conceptual symbols of this deterministic conception include the concept of social development seen as necessarily progressing towards a better ordering of human social life, the theory of the civilizing process, developed in closest contact with a sequence of empirical examples, or the related theory of the increasing social differentiation and integration of relatively small into increasingly large state-units, has also often been interpreted in these terms. There has been an inclination to see these studies, as if it were self-evident, as based on the idea that long-term transformations in a particular direction are necessarily transformations towards improvement.

This is a misunderstanding. Although they concern studies of long-term transformations which can certainly be characterized as social development, there is not one sentence in these studies which conveys the impression that they constitute an anachronistic revitalization of the metaphysics of development and progress of earlier centuries. The studies show, with the help of specific evidence, that one can in fact observe unplanned but directional transformations in social and personality structures. The question is not whether these transformations are for better or for worse, but first and foremost of what sorts of transformations they actually were, and above all how one can explain them. At first it is only their 'how' and 'why' which stand at the centre of attention. Only after questions of this sort are brought closer to solution are we in a position to judge whether, in what sense and for which human groups observable transformations in social and personality structures, seen in long-term perspective, produce more advantages or disadvantages, that is, transformations for better or worse.

VIII

Moreover, it is only a concern with the how and why of long-term processes which will provide us with the opportunity to acquire an orientation

sufficiently broad and close to reality to enable us to decide whether short-term practical measures intended to remedy damage and disadvantage do not in the longer term produce even greater damage and disadvantage. It is precisely when one reflects on the practical relevance of social scientific studies that one realizes how misleading a social science must be if it is focused exclusively on the apparently static 'present', on a 'here and now' emptied of its dynamics. The contemporary type of rapidly-growing institutionalized and technicized social planning is – in the poorer, less developed as in the richer, more developed countries – aligned towards future, further development. However, this more conscious, to a greater extent *socially planned* further development, which in some societies encompasses more and more sectors and, in many, all sectors of social practice, is characteristic of a specific phase of a more encompassing *unplanned* development and is constantly interwoven with this unplanned further development of human societies.

The short-term, purely present-focused research programmes of contemporary sociology – and indeed most social sciences – from which we expect an improved orientation to social practice and the social planning of further development, is completely blind to the long-term unplanned social development which created the conditions for a greater degree of conscious social planning, and within which all bureaucratically controlled planning projects and their translation into social practice takes place. We do not ask, on the basis of which unplanned structural transformations of human societies have the number of social planning projects, together with their temporal range and the number of people concerned, increased rapidly precisely in the twentieth century, and especially at all levels of the more developed state societies, including the economic. Because the idea of an unplanned development is still often understood in the eighteenth and nineteenth century sense, we forget the very obvious fact that every intended and planned further development is interwoven with a more comprehensive unplanned development, and we place it in the repository of the unresearchable, like smallpox before the introduction of vaccination. Without the theoretical–empirical study of unplanned development, however, the risks attached to social planning based only on present-focused and thus purely localized studies, remain extraordinarily great. The widespread retreat of contemporary sociology to present-focused problems, justified often enough by their relevance to practice, has correspondingly led to research into the unplanned long-term societal development, which constitutes the framework for today's planned social praxis, being placed beyond the horizon of the human groups involved in this planning. It is not improbable that this limitation of the planners' horizons often proves on closer inspection to be a limit to the usefulness of their plans.

More empirically adequate and testable theoretical models of the long-term unplanned development of societies, therefore, serve as more than an improved orientation towards these unplanned courses of development *per se*. They also have a function for the illumination of those sectors and

enclaves of social development which have already become accessible to relatively short-term planned development. Without endeavouring to construct such models, we cannot discover whether and to what extent we can observe in the development of human societies, seen in long-term perspective, particular structures of succession and disintegration, for example, persistent directions or trends which, despite all changes, lead from the past and through the present, and – when this is the case – how this unplanned and correspondingly aimless and purposeless directionality of social development can be explained. Only when we can better define and explain these more encompassing unplanned developmental structures – and with them the play and counter-play of long-term dominant trends and their counter-trends, which in turn become dominant under certain conditions – than is currently the case, will we be able to develop diagnostic models of the, always limited, scope of the unplanned developmental potential of human groups that will indicate the direction in which further development may be possible. Projects of planned development also require such models of the connections between unplanned developmental trends as a theoretical-empirical framework. Models of this sort are theoretical symbols of the dynamic of every social present as it extends beyond itself and thus becomes the past.

It is characteristic of almost all twentieth century theorists of society that they have no feeling for the immanent impulse towards change, for the transformational impetus (*Wandlungsimpetus*) of every human society (to introduce an essential technical term). Consequently, they also leave unattended the type and extent of the developmental potential of any given society, although it is one of their integral characteristics. Such theorists present human societies symbolically as well-balanced, generally harmonious and thus normally unchanging human constructions. Social changes, often reified as 'social change', appear in this theoretical approach as something additional, as disturbances in a social structure which would not change without disturbance. Social changes are treated in a manner similar to human illnesses, namely as abnormalities, the study of which requires specialists who write books only about 'social change' without regard for other aspects of a society. Moreover, the peculiarity of such an image of human society as a normally static object spreads to all the various concepts of the corresponding sociology, such as 'function' or 'structure'. These take on a different meaning if, as is done here, we recognize the immanent impetus towards change as an integral moment of every social structure and their temporary stability as the expression of an impediment to social change.

Only from this theoretical perspective are we in a position to incorporate the full scope of a society's developmental potential, which depends on its previous course of development and the stage of development it has thus reached, into the field of sociological studies undertaken for planning purposes. One can imagine the misplanning we risk if we impose a purely economic model of relatively capital-rich industrial societies on a capital-deficient society with a predominantly illiterate peasant population,

without systematic sociological examination of its developmental potential and also without regard for the social personality structure of its people.

It is certainly not straightforward to convert sociological theories which represent human societies, or even all humanity, as normally unchanging human constructions, to a theory in which they become recognizable as endless processes. But only when we can complete this conversion will the problem of long-term unplanned trends in social development, which disappears in the theoretical retreat to apparently unchangeable social systems or to purely present-focused empirical studies, acquire its full significance.

IX

There is no shortage of examples of such unplanned trends. The best known include the trend towards increased social differentiation of functions. In the tradition of the social sciences so far, only one aspect has really been discussed and investigated, the increasing division of labour. But the trend concerned is far more comprehensive. It can be observed not only in the production of goods, but also in state administration, in technology and science, and many other areas of social functioning. Sociologically it would correspondingly be more appropriate to speak of the trend towards increasing functional differentiation, or, something still more general, the increasing differentiation of societies and the corresponding increasing specialization in the social positions and functions available to individuals.

Durkheim still saw this trend as an aspect of continuous long-term social development. It is characteristic of sociology's course of development that there have been few subsequent efforts to extend and develop his focus on long-term diachronic processes. His influence can occasionally be seen in studies of current problems in the division of labour (Friedmann 1956). But when such a long and powerful trend in social development is at issue, it becomes particularly clear that its current phase cannot be observed and explained in isolation. Then it becomes particularly necessary to consider that it concerns a continuous trend which can be observed as a dominant trend from humanity's prehistory, with many setbacks and counter-trends, as a directional endless process up to our own times. Only from this perspective does the hitherto unanswered question of how one can explain that human societies have changed over centuries in a particular direction without planning, in this case towards increasing differentiation, or in a narrower sense towards an increasing division of labour, come to light.

It is not especially difficult to establish this trend empirically. To give only one indication, one could, for example, begin with a comparison of the number of known functional groups characterized by a specialized term in societies at different levels of development. Even at first glance one sees that in the less developed societies there are often particular areas with a greater degree of specialization, a greater differentiation of functional groups with specific names, than in societies which are more developed. But the total

number of specialist groups characterized by their own names is larger, with greater regularity, in the more developed societies. One only has to compare the number of functional groups characterized by a specific name in classical Greek antiquity with that of functional groups in late medieval city- or state-societies, and these in turn with the total of such differentiated functional groups in a present-day highly industrialized nation-state, to see the contours of the process of increasing functional specialization (Bücher 1946).

At the same time, counter-trends are ever-present. A de-functionalization of existing specializations constantly resurfaces in the course of social development. It may be limited to parts of the structure of social functions, as was the case when craft weavers were defunctionalized by factory labour and mechanical looms, or knights on horses by foot soldiers fighting with firearms, and with their function they simultaneously lost their power chances and social position. It may comprise the whole functional structure of a unit of social integration, as was the case in the gradual decline in specialization in late antiquity, first in the Western Roman Empire and later also in the Eastern empire ruled from Constantinople. In the territories of the former Western Roman Empire, this trend towards reduction in differentiation, the defunctionalization of formerly available specializations, reached its apex in the early feudal societies. The explanation for the dominance in this period of a trend towards reduction in differentiation is still disputed. But it is beyond doubt that the gradual collapse of the centralized Western Roman state apparatus, partly through internal disintegration, partly through destruction from without, played a decisive role in the decline of social differentiation within the areas ruled by the former West Roman Empire, in which the sole surviving large organization, no matter how damaged, was really only the Roman Church. A precise explanation is also necessary for the process of increasing social differentiation which then commenced anew. All that is certain is that in this case too, increasing differentiation went hand in hand with increasing integration in the form, firstly, of still loosely centralized state organizations, the renewed monopolization of physical violence and the commencement of pacification within some state territories.

This shift towards increasing social differentiation, which began slowly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the corresponding slowly accelerating growth in chains of functional interdependence binding people to each other, has remained dominant to this day. In this case, too, there is no lack of counter-trends. But the explanation for the centuries-long dominance of the process of increasing social specialization, as well as the increase in the rate of specialization, particularly in Western Europe, has not yet attained the degree of scientific consensus among sociologists which would justify conveying this perspective on the formation of European societies to children through school textbooks. We can expect – and hope – that sooner or later this will be the case, for knowledge of these long-term processes and their explanation is absolutely indispensable for the self-understanding of

people living today, and not only in Europe. Only with the help of this long-term view, with the help of knowledge about the dominance of the trend of increasing social differentiation and its explanation, can we understand why currently in the more developed industrial countries, the number of specialist groups with distinct names has become larger than in any other, earlier society; and only then can we understand that it is not just to the credit of the current generation of people generally who form the more developed societies, but the interim outcome of a process which stretches unplanned over many generations, the basis of which we can only understand when we set aside the question of whether it involves improvement or decline for the people concerned.

There are enough examples of such unplanned trends towards increasing differentiation in our own time. Think, for example, of increasing scientific and technological specialization, which represents only a small aspect of the long spurt of differentiation discussed above, but illustrates the character of such trends. It shows how people, through the pursuit of their limited individual goals, simultaneously keep in motion an unintended social process which in some senses obstructs their original intentions. People today are almost as helpless in the face of the occurrence of such processes as people at an earlier level of development were in the face of processes of non-human nature. As in their case, we can only hope to control the aspects of such trends which are unwelcome to the socially interdependent people affected by them, when we have reliable explanations for their long-term dynamics and not just unreliable impressions of their predominance yesterday and today.

The rapidly increasing scientific and technical specialization of our time, with all its advantages, has at the same time obvious disadvantages for the people concerned. On closer inspection, it is easy to recognize that increasing functionally differentiated specialization accentuates the dependence of every specialist group on other specialist groups and, furthermore, on a growing number of other specialist groups. This applies not only to specialist groups in science and technology, but generally to groups of all sorts. In the course of increasing social differentiation of functions, the chains of interdependence within which every single specialist group is interwoven lengthen. But in many cases, and especially in cases of groups of highly individualized scientists and academic groups in general, the desire for professional independence outweighs by far any insight into their interdependence with other groups. The development of technical languages, whose specific development often extends well beyond the practical requirements of specialization, is one of the many examples of the invisible fortifications with which academic like other specialist groups surround themselves – often enough without being conscious that to a large extent such fortifications serve to demonstrate and maintain their independence from other groups. The communication difficulties which then arise severely limit cooperation between interdependent specialist groups. Another aspect of these fortifications is the yearning of many scientific specialist groups for

the development of their own autonomous theory for their particular field. This inclination is encountered less frequently in the more developed physical sciences, confident of their progression, where almost all the separate sciences are bound together by a unified central theory, than in the less developed social sciences. In the latter case, especially in sociology, more and more specializations are developing today, with their representatives attempting a grand theory of society from the perspective of their particular field. This generates particular difficulties in communication which require further investigation.

This reference to the increasing social differentiation which can be observed in areas such as science and technology may perhaps provide a clue to the dynamics of such unplanned processes. The need for interdisciplinary co-operation between different scientific specialists is certainly also present in the human sciences. Their representatives are certainly not blind to the interdependence of their own research and teaching with that of other specialist groups. But so far the realization of effective co-operation usually fails because each of the increasing specialist groups works tirelessly on the reinforcement of their own fortifications, through the development of their own methods of research, their specific disciplinary theories or their particular disciplinary language, which serve as symbols of their own professional autonomy. This is a contemporary example of the blind impetus of such processes. But a more precise knowledge as well as a more secure explanation for the trend towards increasing functional differentiation and the lengthening of chains of interdependence in our own time cannot be attained if we limit our perspective to our own present. It is necessary to see the current trend in this direction as a relatively late stage in a comprehensive trend which occurred in our own society's past, and which can at the same time also be observed in the present in societies at another stage of development. The knowledge of other stages in the process of increasing functional differentiation throws light on the stage attained by our own society, and vice versa.

X

Another example of this sort is the long-term trend towards the integration of smaller social units – smaller in relation to the number of people which make them up as well as the size of the territory they inhabit – into larger and increasingly large units of integration. This trend also has its counter-trends: the disintegration processes of social units characteristic of every stage of development. Here too, apart from the great reversal at the end of Western Roman antiquity, the former has remained dominant in European areas. Why that is the case, cannot yet be said. It requires a comparative study of processes of integration in different regions in the world to find a decisive answer. In African areas, for example, integration units at the level of states have up until today constantly – whether through internal

struggles, or under the assault of pre-state groups – disintegrated into smaller integration units. In medieval Europe the military commanders of the Christian states, which were loosely unified through their affiliation to the Papal church, succeeded in fighting off assaults by other groups. That they were able to do this was one of the conditions for the formation of larger state integration units on European soil. This was, in turn, one of the conditions for what we characterize as Europe's 'economic development', as well as simultaneously being reciprocally determined by the latter.

In all these cases, processes of differentiation and integration – in other words, processes of functional differentiation and state formation – have a complementary relationship with each other. The one is blocked when the other fails to reach the same stage. The decline in Western late antiquity demonstrates this. Decreasing functional differentiation, that is, 'economic' regression, and state disintegration went hand in hand (Elias 1994). It is completely absurd to postulate theoretically that one of these processes had priority over the other.

Another of these unplanned long-term trends is the change in social standards of behaviour, that is, in what is socially permitted, what is required and forbidden, and the corresponding transformation of social personality structures towards an increasing civilization of human emotions and behaviour. A provisional explanation of this concept is that in every society known to us, there are specific patterns and balances of the relations between drives and affective impulses, of their social regulation and their individual self-regulation. The structural characteristics of the development towards an advancing civilization, for example, include an increase in the weight of self-regulation relative to external regulation, as well as, accordingly, the weight of self-generated anxiety relative to the fear of others as a means of regulation. Another is the change towards more all-round, more even and above all more moderate and milder self-regulation on the part of individuals, in other words, a self-regulation which lies halfway between the extremes of loose and harsh self-constraint.

Even this long-term trend does not stand on its own. Just as processes of functional differentiation and state formation can only be understood as complementary, civilizing processes can also only be understood and explained as processes complementary to these other trends. For example, the social development towards a more stable monopolization of physical violence and the corresponding monopolization of taxation is a prerequisite for the development of social personality structures in the direction of a greater civilizing of emotions and behaviour, and without the latter the former cannot endure.

A further long-term trend of this sort is the progressively improved attunement of human means of orientation – symbols which serve people simultaneously as means of communication, orientation and control – with what they symbolize. The unplanned processes of capital formation and their long-term course of development in different societies are also connected with this.

One could provide other examples of such long-term trends. They are all interwoven with one another. What they have in common is that they move, unplanned, often over many centuries, in a particular direction. But one must add that each of these trends is always linked to counter-trends. A trend might remain dominant for a long time; then a counter-trend can again completely or partially gain the upper hand. It is precisely at such times of abrupt change that one can recognize how much the various trends mentioned here are connected with each other. None of them has absolute primacy as the foundation or driving force of all the others. The development of the late Western Roman Empire and the transformation of its successor states into feudal societies demonstrates this very graphically. Here what is often characterized as 'economic decline' – expressed more generally: reduction in the number of specialist functions – the breakdown of the state's central monopoly over taxation and physical violence, the loosening of individual self-regulation, increased fear of other powers of a human as well as superhuman kind, the reduction in capital and the decline in the previously-mentioned means of orientation towards increasing fantasy content and decreasing reality content, all went hand in hand. It is hardly possible to say that one or the other of these trends in itself has primacy over all the others. Marx's famous dualistic distinction between base and superstructure, with its one-sided allocation of causal significance seems questionable in the light of this long-term empirical-theoretical model.

The concept of the functional complementarity of diverse unplanned long-term overall changes in human societies provides a conceptual framework for empirical studies which can simultaneously test the adequacy of this framework. This will make it possible to redirect social scientific endeavours, which are threatening to ossify into the dogmatism of antagonistic political parties and ideals. The task which lies before us is to investigate how unplanned but directional changes occur in social and personality structures and how they are to be explained. This is how the function of a theory of civilization can be summed up. It proves to be impossible to expect any understanding of it without referring to the other long-term trends with which civilizing processes are connected.

XI

In this sense one can say that the interweaving of long-term unplanned but explainable processes constitutes the infrastructure of what is currently called 'history'. In other words: the chance, unstructured juxtaposition of people and events described by narrative historians takes place within the framework of long-term structured social changes. To develop theoretical models for these structured, directional but unplanned and purposeless changes and to support such models with more comprehensive evidence remains a scientific task which largely still lies before us. It has a certain

similarity to the task which Darwin with his theory of evolution helped to resolve decisively in the field of biology. This case was also one of demythologization. Darwin was able to perceive the connection between a multitude of observable data which had previously been understood as either teleologically goal-directed or metaphysically as the working of mysterious vital powers, and to conceptualize them rather as blind, unplanned, purposeless and yet directional processes with no predetermined end. He was able further to discover the immanent dynamic of the processes which bring about unplanned and purposeless, but directional and structured changes of this sort and which, when one knows them, can explain such changes.

Mutatis mutandis the case for a reorientation in the perception of social and historical changes is similar. This can perhaps be clarified with an example. It concerns a relatively simple fact, which oversimplifies the perplexing question of the explanation of processes which are unplanned yet directional; but perhaps at the same time it can still enable us to sharpen our view of the problem itself, and to demonstrate the usefulness of the analogy with the change of perspective represented by Darwin.

In the years between 1924 and 1972 the world record for the 5000 metres decreased continuously. In 1924 the famous Paavo Nurmi covered the distance in 14:28.2 minutes. In 1965 the record stood at 13:24.2 minutes. The reduction of the record time for the 5000 metres, thus the progression, took place fairly continuously, but step by step. The world record times for the 5000 metres during the period indicated were as follows:

1924	14:28.2	Nurmi, Finland
1932	14:17.0	Lehtinen, Finland
1939	14:08.8	Mäki, Finland
1942	13:58.2	Hägg, Sweden
1954	13:57.2	Zatopek, Czechoslovakia
1954	13:56.6	Kuts, Soviet Union
1954	13:51.6	Chataway, Great Britain
1954	13:51.2	Kuts, Soviet Union
1955	13:50.8	Iharos, Hungary
1955	13:46.8	Kuts, Soviet Union
1955	13:40.6	Iharos, Hungary
1956	13:36.8	Pirie, Great Britain
1957	13:35.0	Kuts, Soviet Union
1965	13:34.8	Clarke, Australia
1965	13:33.6	Clarke, Australia
1965	13:25.8	Clarke, Australia
1965	13:24.2	Keino, Kenya
1966	13:16.6	Clarke, Australia
1972	13:16.4	Viren, Finland
1972	13:13.0	Puttemans, Belgium

Similar lists could be constructed for other sports which have shown measurable improvements in their world records.

Here one has a simplified model of a directional development. It leaves many questions open, but at the same time it illustrates a number of aspects of an unplanned but structured change. One could, for example, ask why the 'progress' here took place in such small steps. Why did Zatopek run only one second faster than his predecessor in 1954 and not immediately attempt the 1972 world record time? One could ask – and in fact the question has been raised – whether Nurmi, if he were still alive, would be able to compete with the world record holders of today. If this were affirmed, then the further question arises of why he did not take the world record for the 5000 metres to the current time back in 1924. Training methods have certainly improved. But they have also changed under the pressure of the same diachronic sequence as the record itself. Nurmi's achievement was considered in 1924 by his contemporaries as something quite extraordinary. In his case, as in all the others, athletes and their trainers directed the exertion of their combined energies towards breaking the existing world record. That was the problem they posed themselves. To solve it, every previously achieved time was demanding enough. To strive too far beyond the given social standard in one's own time is thus difficult because it makes no sense to the people concerned. Even the greatest individual achievement is a great achievement within a given social framework. People – not just as competing individuals, but also as competing groups – measure the goals they themselves pursue against it. The change in the world record itself represents the change in the social framework over a number of generations. It shows quite clearly how erroneous it is to ascribe a lower human value to the people at an earlier stage of development than those at a later stage. Nurmi was no less 'worthy' – no less 'great' – than Zatopek, Pirie or Keino. Each of these men, in competition with others, shifted the social framework, the tasks the next generation had to fulfil – somewhat further forwards. Without this progressive forward movement, those of the following generation would not have been possible. In sport there is also some cause to speculate that persons who shoot too far beyond the existing world record, who distance themselves too far from their rivals' communicative field, run the risk of killing the sport.

Comparisons can be lame. The world record sequence is, as I said, a simplified example; it has features absent from other cases. But at the same time it still shows quite clearly the way in which a long-term unplanned change in the social framework can develop in a particular direction out of the tension-relations among many individuals, each of whom is directed in their action towards short-term plans and goals. In summary: whether they know it or not, people, as individuals and as groups, find themselves confronted by particular unsolved problems. As long as they have not been able to solve the problems of one problem generation, they cannot deal with those of the next. There is, in other words, a diachronic sequence in the posing and solution of problems, whether it is matter of problems of social practice or problems of scientific theory. One might suggest that the

continuous power struggles of social groups and individuals drive towards the solution of the problem generation at any given time, and that, through the generations, this aimless motor brings about those long-term, unplanned but directional changes in the social framework referred to by concepts such as 'social processes' or 'social development'.

But that requires further study. Initially it must suffice to restore the concept of social process to its rightful place as an indispensable sociological tool. In the crossfire between those who are only able to see the changes in human social associations as unstructured 'history' and those who see it simply as a teleological change predetermined by a specific final goal, it is all too easy to lose the will to break through the barriers of this community of discourse.

The obstacles confronting the perception of long-term social processes, and more generally, social development today, have a certain affinity with the difficulties which impeded the perception of biological development in Lamarck's and Darwin's time. They have been described as follows:

After 1800 the science of living things had stepped from the phase of speculation to that of the attempt at causally analytical thought and work. However, because the notion of a general development of living beings stood close to the eighteenth century's speculative stepladder idea and was also taken from romantic natural philosophy, at the time it seemed suspect to modern researchers. So there are only a few writings in the years between 1809 and 1859 which expressed evolutionary thought. (Querner 1975: 48)

Something similar applies to the taboo on the use of concepts like 'progress' and 'development'. They have fallen into disrepute through their connection with the speculative notions of social development and the automatism of progress which came to the fore in the eighteenth century, and which were then championed with great regularity by the speakers for rising outsider groups, first those from the rising bourgeoisie, then from the rising working class and today also from the rising outsider nations. In the reaction against the metaphysical and romantic ideas about biological development, the whole idea of such a development was rejected, before Darwin freed this idea from its teleological and metaphysical associations. Similarly, today the reaction in the social sciences against the concept of progress and development has also overshot its mark. A new effort is needed to clarify that social development and the demonstrable progress of humankind also concern purposeless, but explainable processes.

Darwin rid the concept of a stepladder of biological development of the emotionally satisfying taste it possessed when such a directional change was automatically seen as a change which had human meaning and purpose. For humans it was meaningful and flattering that the whole ladder was

geared towards them on the highest rung. The long and fierce opposition against Darwin's idea of an evolutionary process, particularly against that of the descent of humans from ape-like predecessors, arose not least from the fact that his intellectual innovation, like those of Copernicus, Marx, Freud and other great scientific innovators, ran counter to the deepest feelings and wishes of his contemporaries. Each of these innovations constituted a deep narcissistic injury – Darwin's innovation not least because he put an end to the idea that humans were the highest goal of biological development, and instead focused on the problem of explaining the completely aimless sequence of biological changes. In this way the loss in fantasy-fulfilment was compensated for by a gain in reality-orientation. Something similar happens on a smaller scale when, instead of the satisfying faith in a predetermined social development towards that which within our own ideals is regarded as progress, the question of the explanation of long-term social processes is placed at the centre of attention – processes which, blind and unplanned, have in many ways led to demonstrable progress. Here it will have to suffice to speculate that the long-term, unplanned progress which can be observed in the course of social development, both in the area of control of nature and that of social organization, can be explained by the advantages which progressive innovations, seen in long-term perspective, can offer the societies which apply them in their power struggles, and often enough their struggles for survival, with rival societies.⁵

At the same time we thus come closer to the solution of an old problem, which has perhaps not even been recognized clearly enough as a problem. It was expressed in an early form in Hegel's idea of the 'Cunning of Reason'. Another expression of it was Marx's idea that social development had to occur, so to speak, above human consciousness in the direction he desired and demanded. In both these cases, admittedly, it was recognized that an unplanned development takes place behind all human plans, but it was implicitly assumed that it concerns a development which is rational, purposeful and meaningful for humans. Recently there has frequently been mention in this regard of the unintended and unplanned consequences of planned and intentional human action. But this and other related indications that actual social development almost always deviates from the development which people have planned and intended in the short term, presents the process as something mysterious and unexplainable. The how and why of the deviation – its structure – remains opaque. The theoretical-empirical insight that every short-term human plan is influenced by long-term unplanned processes, removes that opacity. It makes it clear that the unplanned development which steers planned human action again and again onto unintended tracks, is structured and correspondingly explainable. Systematic research will make long-term unplanned processes more accessible to human understanding. It will also make it possible to take them into account to a far greater degree than ever before in planning

itself. So we need no longer make do with Delphic apperçus like the 'Cunning of Reason' or the 'unintended consequences of intentional human action'.

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NOTES

1. Appeared originally in the *Zeitschrift für Sociologie* 6(2) 1977: 127–49. The assistance of Michael Schröter was acknowledged. This translation is slightly shorter, with two of the footnotes omitted.

2. Many, although perhaps not all, eschatological concepts prove on closer inspection to be images of a future which to a large extent are orientated towards an ideal image of the past. The image of the desirable end then looks very similar to the beginning. So people thought of the end as the re-establishment of God's kingdom or the return of a saviour. What was decisively new about the idea of progress was that it concerned a purely this-worldly, humanly created, advance to a better future.

3. So the young Turgot, for example, wrote in the middle of the eighteenth century:

... all the ages are bound up with one another by a sequence of causes and effects which link the present state of the world with all those that have preceded it. The arbitrary signs of speech and writing, by providing men with the means of securing the possession of their ideas and communicating them to others, have made of all the individual stores of knowledge a common treasure-house which one generation transmits to another, an inheritance which is always being enlarged by the discoveries of each age. Thus the human race, considered

over the period since its origin, appears to the eye of the philosopher as one vast whole, which itself, like each individual, has its infancy and its advancement (1913: 215 [1973: 41]).

4. He also makes the no better supported claim that questions of origin are scientifically not particularly relevant.

5. One thinks, for example, of what we too easily gloss over as the spread of agriculture from the old state societies of the 'Near East' to the nomadic peoples of the European continent. Those among these peoples who acquired agriculture over a number of generations, then gained the possibility of a regular food supply and a higher living standard. But in recollecting such a social development one often does not express clearly enough how many struggles must have taken place, both within the changing hunting and gathering societies themselves and between them and other competing societies before agriculture became dominant. The example is useful, because it reminds us that the concept of social development often glosses over the power and survival struggles which drove this development.

This is not to say that all future development necessarily *has* to occur in this form, that is, in connection with struggles for survival. This blind form of human progress takes place with many setbacks, along many crooked pathways, and is extremely wasteful of life and meaning. Precisely the realization of unplanned, blind and costly

processes of social development places at the centre of attention whether people are capable of finding less wasteful ways to progress.

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