Postscript to the English translation

It has now been a decade since *Une histoire critique de la sociologie allemande. Aliénation et réification* was published in two volumes by La Découverte in Paris (Vandenberghe, 1997–1998). The book has been well received and although I was out of France for most of the time, I could sense that it had found an enthusiastic readership among sociologists – given the title, which was suggested for commercial reasons, unfortunately it did not land on the shelves of philosophers. Ten years is a long time, and since then I moved on from critical theory to phenomenology and hermeneutics, and from sociology to philosophy and anthropology. As I had to cut some three hundred pages and almost all the footnotes for the English translation, there was no way to revise and update the book. Instead of a revision I decided to write this postscript in which I recount my own intellectual trajectory. I hope the reader will forgive me for referencing myself.

Having just reread the English version for the sake of correction, I still stand by most of the ideas I developed in the book. I think the idea of a metacritique of critical theory, understood as a critique of the metatheoretical assumptions of social and sociological theory, is a good one, though, as I will explain below, I have now refined my understanding of metatheory and its relations to social and sociological theory. I also think that the idea of a critical theory that reflexively controls its own assumptions so as to avoid the pitfalls of a hypercritique that sublimates its moral indignation into a theoretical denunciation of domination is a sound one.

Although and precisely because the current conjuncture does not leave much space for hope, it is important to maintain a bi-focal perspective that complements the analysis of the structures of domination with an analysis of the possibilities of emancipation. Prepare for the worst, hope for the best-this variation on Romain Rolland's "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" – remains valid, but to put it effectively into action, some kind of self-critique and self-transformation is needed. To the extent that transformative social action presupposes a transformation of the self, critical theory is indeed a way of life. In this sense, I follow Ram Roy Bhaskar (2000: 68) when he invokes "the dialectic of transform*ed* transformative praxis."

I must confess that I have not kept up with the secondary literature on any of the authors that make up the bulk of the book. The idea of becoming a Marxologist, a Weberologist or a even Simmelologist never appealed to me, though I have

written a booklet on Georg Simmel (Vandenberghe, 2001). As the focus on reification was displaced by a systematic reconstruction that presented Simmel's thought as an idiosyncratic synthesis of neo-Kantianism and *Lebensphilosophie*, the book corrected my interpretation of Simmel as a tragic thinker and restituted the ambivalence that marks his views on modernity. While the book foregrounded the principle of duality, my investigation of his writings on religion emphasized the principle of unity (Vandenberghe, 2002a). Through a rediscovery of the soul as a space of symbolic transfiguration that gathers the contents of the world into a unified vision without fractures, the tragic vision of the world was finally displaced by a "weak mysticism." Compared with Simmel, Max Weber is more prosaic and less speculative. Apparently rejecting metaphysics, his whole work is, in fact, a struggle against Hegel and, as such, a reaction-formation against the enchantment of dialectics. I had some initial sympathy for Max Weber, but as I feel there is something profoundly perverse in his compulsion to tell the truth that there is no truth, I gradually distanced myself from his epistemic nominalism, his moral relativism and his political decisionism (Vandenberghe, 2000b). With its fascination for power and powerful leaders (rather than moral exemplars), the seigniorial tenor of his work finds its logical complement in a Nietzschean contempt for the "last men" and, thus, for democracy. Faced with the advance of really existing capitalism and the final demise of communism, Marxism has regained some of its actuality and its appeal, though at the same time the reflexes of old school Marxism often obscure as much as they reveal. The Marxist gospel of work, for instance, has itself turned into

an ideology of the industrial society that blocks the breakthrough of an alternative economy beyond the market and the state (Vandenberghe, 2002b). No doubt Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi are better guides for thinking about collective projects that seek to 're-embed' the market into society and point beyond the compulsions of the work society. To remain faithful to Marx and get to the 'rational kernel' of his thought, we probably have to throw out 80 percent of his writings (the percentages are negotiable, though). Over the last years, I have reread Lukács on various occasions, but I still cannot quite make up my mind if my predilection for Hegelian dialectics compensates for my aversion for Marxist dogmatism. I definitely have more patience now for the philosophy of history and think that sociology should overcome its skepticism of collective subjectivities and look for avatars of the proletariat. I never returned to Adorno, Horkheimer or Marcuse, but I continue to read Habermas and his work remains a constant source of inspiration to me. Fortunately, to be a Habermassian does not mean that one accepts his theory lock, stock, and barrel. It means rather that one trusts in the power of dialogue and banks on universalism without apologies.

Since I finished the book, I have moved away from a strictly disciplinary view of sociology. Although I still insist that I am merely a sociologist and not a philosopher, I have accepted that philosophers consider me as one of them, but I steadfastly refuse the epithet when it comes from sociologists. All too often sociologists, especially American ones, have too narrow a conception of sociology and mistrust the speculative constructions of social theory. If we were to apply their limited vision of sociology, neither Marx (a Hegelian) nor Weber (a Nietzschean) nor

Postscript to the English translation 291

Durkheim (a Kantian) – not to mention Simmel (a Bergsonian) or Tarde (a Leibnizian) – would qualify as proper sociologists. Undisciplined, I like to approach authors and texts through a chiasmatic hermeneutics. When I read sociologists I look for their philosophy and when I read philosophers I look for their sociology. Sometimes in vain. My project to develop a theory of affective action grounded in the moral sentiment of sympathy did not materialize. To confirm my intuition that universal solidarity is grounded in a spontaneous and silent act of intersubjective recognition of common humanity that precedes communication, I plunged into the phenomenology of Husserl, especially into his interminable descriptions of *Einfühlung*, whereas I should really have started with the hermeneutics of Dilthey. In any case, I got seriously lost in the forest of the Husserliana and started to despair that I would ever get out of my state of transcendental loneliness. As I delved deeper and deeper into Husserl's phenomenology of intersubjectivity, I came to realize that a transcendental sociology was a nonstarter and a contradiction in terms. Sociology simply has to presuppose the existence of the other. The other is encountered, as Sartre said, not constituted as an *alter ego*.

I needed a few years to overcome my *phobia phenomenologica* and, as a matter of fact, it is only via Max Scheler that I recently succeeded in resuming my project to found sociology in philosophical anthropology (Vandenberghe, 2006b, 2008a). Returning 'to the things themselves', the debate with Latour led me to an engagement with economic anthropology (Latour, 2001, Vandenberghe, 2006a). Society may be kept together by things, as Latour pointed out in his theory of reification without alienation, but things are also kept together by people who encounter humans and non humans in their environment and endow them with meaning. While commodities depersonalize the relations between people, gifts personalize relations between things, and to know whether objects are more important than subjects, one needs a realist theory of social formations that is able to distinguish between the moral economy of the gift and the political economy of commodities. Provided that one properly enters into the thicket of material, technological, social, and personal relations that constitute things as gifts, commodities or technologies, one can analyze them as condensations of society at large. As things are complexes of relations, one can as it were, by following humans and non humans across space, pull the whole of society out of a concrete object, which is at the same time social, symbolic, economic, aesthetic, juridical, and religious. As a kind of

homage to Marcel Mauss, it would be worthwhile to develop the concept of the
"global total social fact", but obviously this can not be done here.

The preceding remarks suffice to indicate that I am more drawn to the speculative
than to the empirical side of the sociological continuum that connects the
transcendental to the factual. Convinced that all good empirical research presupposes
solid fieldwork in philosophy, I would now like to articulate the cascading
relations of implication between meta-, social, and sociological theory. Like in the
Indian story of the turtles, theory goes down all the way. Explicit philosophical
visions become metatheoretical presuppositions of social theory, which, in turn,
become presuppositions of sociological theory, which, in turn, inform research.
The young Althusser (1968: 186–197) was on good grounds when, within

theoretical praxis, he distinguished between Generalities I (facts, which are always
already overdetermined by theory), Generalities II (the conceptual framework, i.e.
a set of metatheoretical assumptions and foundational concepts) and Generalities
III (substantive theory, i.e. a set of statements about particular socio-historical formations
that dialectically integrates the data into a complex representation of
reality). When Generalities II (like dialectics, for instance) are made to work on
Generalities I (empirical observations and other research materials), the latter are
transformed into knowledge of Generalities III (such as, the theory of the "laws" of
capitalism, for instance). The distinction between conceptual framework and substantive
theory, between social theory and sociological theory, is not watertight,
but the suggestion that theory should explicitly focus on the nexus between
Generalities II and III seems useful to me. Moreover, it justifies the existence of
social theory as a relatively autonomous subfield of sociology.

To add analytical precision to the framework, I'd like to fine-tune the discussion
and distinguish between metatheory (1), social theory (2), and sociological theory
(3).

Metatheory

Metatheory is theory about social and sociological theory and, as such, it usually
proceeds through commentary and critique of the classics. A good deal of metatheory
involves reflection about what makes 'exemplars' of sociology paradigmatic. It
can be quite arcane, almost scholastic with scholars discussing in earnest, say,
Bhaskar's critique of Althusser's (Spinozian) interpretation of Marx's
(Feuerbachian) reading of Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie*. At its most simple, metatheory
consists in a mapping exercise of the general presuppositions and assumptions
(*Weltanschauungen*, world hypotheses, paradigms, knowledge interests, prejudgments,
etc.) of social and sociological theory. For teaching purposes, sociologists
distinguish different principles of vision and division within the history of sociology
and classify them in terms of polarities: individualism vs. holism, action vs.
structure, micro vs. macro, idealism vs. materialism, functionalism vs. dialectics,
consensus vs. change, etc. Although these pairs of oppositions are only too well
known to deserve further attention, it may be worth noting that the history of the
discipline is periodically rewritten in textbooks that tend to privilege one pair of
oppositions over the other. The canonical version of the present is hugely indebted
to Alexander (1987) and Giddens (1976). It typically foregrounds the agencystructure
debate as foreplay to the 'new theoretical movement' of the 1980s
(Alexander, 1988). The highly ritualized invocation of the usual suspects
(Bourdieu, Giddens, Habermas, sometimes Luhmann and R. Collins are considered
as well) makes one wonder if it would not be worthwhile resurrecting other,
older polarities, such as functionalism or structuralism vs. dialectics, for instance,
in order to rewrite and overcome the staleness of the recent historiography of social
and sociological theory.

The mapping exercise is not an end in itself, however, but a prolegomenon to
theory construction. The aim and ambition is to develop a general, synthetic and

encompassing social theory that is in continuous dialogue with the sociological

tradition, covers all its angles and incorporates its fundamental insights in a coherent framework of interrelated concepts. If we continuously return to the classics and revisit the various traditions of theorizing, it is because we sense that together they offer a comprehensive vision of the social world that avoids the unilateralism of each of them taken separately. Durkheim, Weber, and Marx form a 'canonical set'. By this I not only mean to say that the founding fathers are canonized and that their works are almost ritually invoked as a badge of allegiance to the discipline, but also that the positions, and the permutations of the positions they represent, form a coherent system of possibilities that defines the metatheoretical space of social theory. Weber corrects the holism of Durkheim with an action theory and the materialism of Marx with a theory of culture; Durkheim overcomes the nihilism of Weber with his Kantian view of republicanism and Marx with his insistence on consensus and the collective consciousness; Marx allows for a dialectical integration of Weber's action theory and Durkheim's view of social facts, and so on and so forth. In the book at hand I have presented a metacritique and worked out a negative formulation of the principle of multi-dimensionality: theories that reduce the concept of action to its instrumental and strategic dimension will end up with a deterministic vision of society that leaves hardly any space for transformative action and progressive social change. A more positive formulation has been offered by Jeffrey Alexander in his systematic reconstruction of the theories of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons (Alexander, 1982–1983). Following Parsons's *Structure*, he argues that theories should overcome the limitations of deterministic materialism and of idealistic emanationism, while integrating their insights into a general theory of action that spells out the relations between material conditions, ends/means, and ultimate values in a complex theory of systems. Although one may doubt if Alexander's 'cultural sociology' satisfies the criteria he set himself out at the start of his career (Vandenberghe, 2008b), the fact remains that by interconnecting the problems of action and order, his treatise has successfully captured and formalized the metatheoretical logic that animates general sociological theory. What remains unclear, however, is where the transcendental presuppositions of sociology come from in the first place.

They come from philosophy and to further systematize the metatheory of sociology, I would like to distinguish (a) ontological, (b) epistemological, (c) ideological, and (d) anthropological assumptions.

Ontological assumptions

Ontological assumptions have to do with postulations regarding the constitution of the world. Either the world is ultimately made up of ideas (idealism) or stuff (materialism), though obviously the whole point of philosophizing is to propose a worldview that interrelates both in a dynamic scheme. In the social sciences, the perpetual debate between idealism and materialism takes the form of a disputation on how to conceive of action, and how to link agency and structure, Weber's acts and Durkheim's facts, into a non-reductive coherent framework. As regards the

nature of action, my position is clear: if one is to avoid determinism, one should always take culture (symbols, ideas, norms, values) into account and aim for an interpretative approach to action. Hermeneutics, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, ordinary language philosophy, even psycho-analysis will do, but not rational choice. Everything I said in the book was directed against the rats. If I did not go into rational choice, it is because I think it is hardly worth the discussion. This may not be the most rational position – I am indeed inspired by values – but with regard to rational choice, my strategy has always been the siege: encircle the fortress, undermine its fortifications, weaken its positions and force it to surrender.

My stand regarding the concept of action entails a definite conception of order. The first decision in theory construction, namely to opt for a synthetic position that overcomes the idealism-materialism divide with a conception of action that acknowledges the non rational dimension of human behavior, necessarily implies a reference to a symbolic rather than a biotic order of determination. And as the symbolic

order always precedes, predates and predetermines agency, my position is necessarily a holistic one. Even more, what distinguishes sociology *qua* sociology and differentiates it from both economics and politics, is precisely its holism. This holism expresses itself paradoxically in the defense of moral individualism. Sociology is anti-utilitarian in principle. It represents a definite choice against Mandeville and Hobbes, though via the Marxist and Weberian legacies that stress the material constraints on action, the strategic side of social life is brought back to the fore.

All social theories necessarily imply a reference to social structures, cultural structures, and agency. Social structures refer to systems of relations between material positions; cultural structures refer to systems of relations between symbols, ideas, and values; while agency is nothing else but the concrete implication of both. If the integration of hermeneutics and phenomenology points to a synthetic concept of action, it does not yet resolve the opposition between agency and structure. Although some strands within social theory, like rational choice and world systems theory, for instance, still go for the extremes, there seems to be a strong consensus that the way has to cut through the middle and mediate the extremes. One way or another, the most sophisticated approaches are the dialectical ones that favor an ontology of praxis. Giddens's theory of structuration and Bourdieu's generative structuralism are currently the best-known examples of such praxeological theories that try to integrate structuralism and ordinary language philosophy (Giddens) or Marxism and existential phenomenology (Bourdieu), but anyone who has struggled his way through Hegel or dabbled in Marxism, has proposed his or her own variation on the ontology of praxis. Limiting myself to French theory, I could mention the theories of Sartre, Goldmann, Gurvitch, Castoriadis, Freitag, Morin, Balandier or Dupuy as examples of dialectic synthesizers.

Epistemological assumptions

While ontological assumptions predefine the contours of the world, epistemological postulates circumscribe the limits of knowledge. In philosophy, the old opposition

Postscript to the English translation 295

between empiricism and rationalism is an epistemological divide. In the social sciences, the fundamental debate concerns the possibility of naturalism. In other words, can one transpose the methods of the natural sciences to the social sciences or does the ontological structure of the world preclude such a move? Personally, I am convinced that there are strong ontological, epistemological, and moral reasons to resist naturalism. In the same way as I oppose rational choice, I combat positivism with all possible means. As a matter of fact, with their combination of materialism and empiricism, statistics and choice, the two converge in a deterministic worldview that leaves hardly any space for freedom. The protestations to the contrary of methodological individualism should not be taken at face value. If action is reduced to rational choice and the material conditions of action are known, the rational course of action can be determined almost automatically. All one needs are some logarithms and the optimal course of action can be calculated (being merely analytic, I wonder if rational choice has anything to say about real action). Trained as a mainstream sociologist by empirico-positivists who mistake correlations for demonstrations and go into regression analysis without ever believing in former lives, I was always looking for the philosophical hammer that would smash their toys. And with critical realism I finally found it. If positivism does not hold water in the natural sciences, why would it be valid in the human sciences? The human sciences are, by nature, moral sciences (to use the consecrated translation of Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaften*) and need, therefore, to be 'exhumed' so as to develop their own philosophies, theories, concepts, methods, and techniques of explanation and interpretation. If the social sciences belong to the human sciences, the reverse is not necessarily true. The social sciences have to go beyond the humanities and reckon with the unintended consequences of human action that crystallize into social systems that have their own momentum and follow their own laws. Giddens was right on this point, but his insistence on the 'theorem of duality' and the consequent exclusion of 'emergence' from the theory of structuration meant that he could not satisfactorily account for the existing dualism

of agency and structures, or better, systems that are generated by cultural structures
that produce practices that reproduce or transform enduring social
institutions (Archer, 1988 and 1995). Giddens offers a good theory of the circular
relation between agency and culture, but not between agency and social structures.
As he cannot handle dualism, he cannot handle the phenomenon of reification
either. The alienating autonomization of social systems is not an illusion, but a
genuine impediment that blocks the dialectical interplay between agency and systems.
To properly theorize the phenomenon of reification, one needs at least a
solid conception of social structures as systems of internal relations. I think that
Bourdieu's concept of fields, which is heavily indebted to Ernst Cassirer's early formulation
of structuralist logic, offers a good lead, provided it is properly grounded
in realist assumptions (Vandenberghe, 1999b). Thanks to its theorization of emergent
effects, relational structures and generative causal mechanisms, critical realism
is able to overcome the limitations of structuration theory, while integrating
its emphasis on the necessity to build a theory of action into a theory of structures
(no action: no structures). If critical realism offers the scaffolding of a good theory

of material structures, it needs, however, still to be supplemented by a hermeneutic
theory of symbolic structures, a phenomenological theory of action that connects
symbolic structures to common sense, and a realist theory of collective
subjectivities.

Now that I have presented the onto-epistemological scaffolding which I believe
necessary for a general theory of society, I want to bring in the micro-macro dimension
as a continuum that refers to levels of reality at which collective subjectivities
can operate (Vandenberghe, 2007a). The mic/mac distinction should not be confounded
with or collapsed into the one between agency and structure. Simply
speaking, it refers to size – "ranging from Small to XXL", as Latour (2005: 31)
nicely puts it – and size is, by definition, relative. Agency and structure operate at
all levels of reality (micro-, meso- and macro, with 'loose couplings' and 'multiple
entanglements' between them; the macro is in the micro, the micro in the macro,
etc.). At the micro-level, we find situated actions and interactions; groups and
organizations exist at the meso-level; while social movements, societies and worldsystems
operate at the macro-level. In accord with the foregoing considerations, all
social entities at all levels have to be theorized synthetically, i.e. taking into
account both the material and the ideal dimensions of reality, incorporating
realism with hermeneutics and phenomenology.

In order to properly conceptualize dialectical interchanges between agency
and structure (if one starts with a more individualistic approach) or between
structure and agency (if one starts with a more collectivist approach), it is important
not to lose sight of collective subjectivities. Elsewhere, I have proposed a
realist theory of collective subjectivities that tracks its constitution all the way
from dyads to humanity as such (Vandenberghe, 2007b). The question that
animated my quest was how individuals and groups can be interconnected into
networked collective actors that can act with will and consciousness, and, thanks
to the action of spokespersons who legitimately speak in the name of the larger
collective, defend their interests, identities, and ideals. Collective subjectivities,
of which social movements are only a specific, but important subtype, intervene in
society. As a matter of fact, and in spite of the inertia that characterizes societies
and world-systems, these are, ultimately, sedimentations of collective actions,
and, as such, materializations of collective intentions to reproduce or transform
the world in accord with the interests, ideas, and ideals of the collective. Through
unending sequences of creation and sedimentation, de-sedimentation and recreation,
reproduction and transformation the social world comes into existence
as a complex of intended and unintended consequences of collective action.

With regard to the struggle against alienating sedimentations of former actions,
collective subjectivities play a pivotal role. Intervening at the hinge between
structure and agency, reification and creation, sedimentation and transformation,
they are the agents of social change who, confronted with social blockages

and fuelled by a mixture of ideologies and utopias, coordinate their actions at all levels of the social and call for action to make the world move in a different direction.

Ideological assumptions

Ontological and epistemological presuppositions determine the foundational concepts and strategies of social theory. As the metatheoretical decisions cannot be completely separated from the political ones, it is important to explicitly introduce the ideological dimension into the framework. Successive generations in the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of science have called for a 'sociology of sociology'. The task of a reflexive sociology is to reconnect the metatheoretical to the political, and the political to the personal, so as to articulate scholarship and commitment into a critical theory of intellectuals. Inspired by the work of Mannheim, Gouldner and Bourdieu, I'd like to stress that the social scientist is not only a professional, but also an intellectual. Analyzing society from within society, working within "the subsystem of sociology, which is itself a subsystem of science which is, in turn, a subsystem of society" (Luhmann, 1981: 34), the social scientist must be aware of his or her own position – and not just of the position of his or her own opponents! – within the various fields and subfields of society. The various positions and permutations within the metatheoretical space of possibilities do not vary randomly, but are linked, one way are another, to the crosscutting linkages and cleavages that are associated with the various positions one occupies within the social world and the academic fields, not to mention the countries, regions and continents to which one happens to belong. In their respective analyses of the 'German ideology', both Karl Mannheim (1964: 408–508) and Louis Dumont (1991) have shown that the holistic option expresses a rather conservative worldview that is linked to the decline of the propertied classes. A similar analysis of the 'American ideology' would probably allow one to show that the utilitarian worldview of rational choice or the mechanistic worldview of the positivists expresses the *Weltanschauung* of respectively the upwardly and downwardly mobile lower middle classes.

Anthropological assumptions

Be that as it may, I have now arrived at the conviction that the whole range of possible positions within the metatheoretical space of possibilities is, in the last instance, determined by philosophical anthropology. By philosophical anthropology, I mean to refer to the various answers, explicit or not, that have been given to the question: What kind of animal is the human being? The reference to the animal realm is essential, because the human being is defined by contrast to animals and Gods. Half angel, half beast, Man (generically understood as *der Mensch* and in spite of the clumsy translation emphatically NOT as *der Mann)* has traditionally been conceived of as a dual being (*homo duplex*). Following the collapse of the Christian *ordo*, the place of the human being within the cosmos has become problematic. Man has become a problem to himself, and knows that he is the problem. Within the German tradition, the reflections about human nature have been systematized in the 1920s by Scheler, Gehlen and Plessner. This tradition has been discontinued, but the questions they have asked remain fundamental for the social sciences.

The question of human nature is as unbearably problematic as it is unavoidable. Any social theory necessarily presupposes an image of Man. Innumerous adjectives have been used to define the human animal – from *animal rationale* (a translation of Aristotele's definition of man as a *zoon echon logon*, i.e. as a speaking animal) to *homo cyberneticus*, but, at the end of the day, I think that the dividing line falls between humanists and anti-humanists. Whereas the former tend to conceive of the human as a fallen angel, the latter only see a dangerous biped without feathers. If humanists detranscendentalize God in order to upgrade the human (*homo homini Deus*), anti-humanists downgrade the human (*homo homini lupus*), and warn

against his *hubris*. While the former secularize the Spirit into culture, anti-humanists will typically insist on nature, drives, and passions. Either man is good and can be trusted, or he is bad and has to be disciplined and domesticated. Rousseau or Hobbes, all options seem to boil down to these two. What holds for theories of the state (Schmitt, 1991: 59 ff.) also holds for theories of society. Either one distrusts Man and, therefore, entrusts him to the state or society, or one trusts Man and believes that social life will spontaneously be harmonious and, therefore, does not need any external regulation other than the one they have tacitly subscribed to in the unwritten social contract that keeps them together. Everything depends on of how the state of nature is conceived. I know this is a terrible simplification – as Rabindranath Tagore (2002: 51) said: "Men are cruel, but Man is kind"; it nevertheless helps to clarify the metatheoretical options. To the extent that all ontological, epistemological, and ideological choices seem predetermined by the stance one takes towards the human, philosophical anthropology is the metascience *par excellence*.

Social theory

Whereas metatheory maps the possible positions within the field without prescribing a particular combination, social theory starts from a well defined metatheoretical position, associated with a certain tradition (e.g. neo-Marxism, functionalism, pragmatism, etc.), and tries to work its way up to a general theory of society. Theory construction is guided by the logic of complementarities and oppositions. The social theorist – let's assume she's a phenomenologist –, starts from a theory of intentional action. Exploring concomitant complementarities, she spontaneously drifts towards hermeneutics. From the position of hermeneutically informed theory of intentional action, she can then either refuse to engage with behaviorist theories of action (rational choice) and neo-Marxist theories of structure, or compromise with them and try out a variant of phenomenological Marxism (as Marcuse, Sartre, Kosic, Paci and Tran Duc-Thao did). Alternatively, if she becomes a fan of Elias's figuration theory, she will avoid Parsons as well as Berger and Luckmann. There are good chances, however, that she will run into the work of Bourdieu, discover his concept of habitus and try to bring in some reflexivity to loosen up the reproductive tendencies of genetic structuralism. Whatever the variations and permutations are, whatever position one drifts to or shies away from, we know already more or less what the options are, though, of course, we

cannot exclude genuine innovations and creations (but they are rare, and as they will also recombine former ideas, they are relatively predictable).

At two different occasions, at the end of the 1930s with Talcott Parsons and at the end of the 1970s with Anthony Giddens, social theory has emerged as a relatively autonomous field within sociology. As a substitute to philosophy for those who do not master the philosophical tradition, social theory is based on common references. Parsons, Bourdieu, Mannheim, Castoriadis, or Laclau are generally accepted references, with Brandom, Hadot or Hösle falling beyond the purview of your social theorist. Colleagues and students will no doubt have noticed that Bourdieu has now become a dominant name in the field to which any self-respecting sociologist occasionally will pay due homage. Given his stature, this is only fair enough. His position can perhaps be compared to the one Parsons occupied after the Second World War. Aiming to transcend the fragmentation of the field of sociology by opening up to neighboring disciplines, social theories propose a series of integrated fundamental concepts (such as field, habitus, and capital; communicative action, life-world, and system; or actant, association and socio-technical network) that can be universally applied to all situations or, at least, allow one to analyze them from a certain angle, by throwing light on certain aspects, while obscuring others. In spite of their universal pretensions, no social theory has ever attained full hegemony. As social theory is always a child of its age and highly susceptible to passing fads, social theories always come in the plural. Although social theory is usually practiced by professional sociologists, it is not their prerogative. Unlike sociological theory, social theory encompasses issues that are the concern

of all the social sciences. While some disciplines (like social and cultural geography)
import their concepts, others (like philosophy, sociology, and anthropology)
export them. The issues that occupy social theorists are many – questions of multiparadigmatism,
the unity of sociology and its relation to the human sciences; naturalism,
positivism, hermeneutics, realism; the nature and forms of action, institutions
and social structure; relation between individual and society, agency and structure,
order and conflict; the problem of social order, society and globalization; postmodernism,
deconstruction, identity, etc. But better follow Joas and Knöbl (2004:
37–38) when they suggest that social theory can be understood as an ongoing search
for answers to three questions: "What is action?", "What is social order?"; "What
determines social change?" The relations between the three questions are implicative
ones. Action is not contingent, but always already caught up in determinate social
orders, and these social orders vary historically. With the theme of historical variation,
we are already on the threshold of sociological theory. Social theory is more
abstract, but one only has to scratch the surface to find that every social theory is only
an ontology of the present in disguise. Consequently, it is no wonder that the descriptions
of social theory often have prescriptive, diagnostic and remedial functions.

Sociological theory

Sociological theory, the third and last concept of the triad, deals with 'big
structures, large processes, huge comparisons' (Tilly, 1984). It is not only more

disciplinary, but also more historical than social theory. As a reflexive analysis of
sociology that ties the discipline back to its context of emergence, sociological theory
is inherently linked to modernity and its transformations. Sociology emerged
with modernity and it may very well disappear with it – like anthropology, which
overtaken by cultural, post-colonial and science studies, seems to be on the verge
of self-abolishment. It is now generally accepted that *homo sapiens* originated in the
African Savannah some 200,000 years ago. Sociology, however, only deals with
the last two centuries (or, at most, with the last five), leaving the remainder to historians
and anthropologists. This is no coincidence. As a socio-analysis of modern
times, sociology emerged as a relatively autonomous discipline in the nineteenth
century in the wake of the scientific, political, and industrial revolutions that
sparked the epochal transition to modernity. What distinguishes modernity from
all preceding epochs is the institutionalization of social change – the social change
of social change as it were. Colonialism, capitalism, industrialism, urbanism, the
nation-state, secularism, and individualism are the hallmarks of modernity. The
separation of the modern from the traditional world went together with a disciplinary
fracture within the social sciences. Henceforth, sociology would investigate
the West, anthropology the rest. The separation from anthropology coincided
with sociology's differentiation from politics and economics – via its opposition to
utilitarianism, sociology succeeded, however, in maintaining its vital connection
with anthropology. The discovery of society as a relatively autonomous formation,
differentiated from the state and the market, that follows its own laws, founds sociology
as a discipline. The functional differentiation of society, its emergence from
a life-world in which it was embedded in traditional societies, is not only something
that sociology registers as a sign of modernity, but also something that it presupposes
in its own constitution.

Classical sociological theory emerged in the nineteenth century in Europe as a
child of its time. While humanity enters the third millennium, sociology enters its
second century. Periodizations are always somewhat arbitrary, but I find the one
proposed by Peter Wagner (1994) and José Maurício Domingues (2006) quite convenient.
They distinguish three phases of modernity: liberal, organized, and flexible
modernity. The first phase goes roughly from 1789 to 1914, and is characterized
by political and economic liberalism. It finds its organizing principle in the market.
This classic modernity entered into a crisis when it was confronted with the social
question. The second phase of modernity, which goes roughly from 1914 till 1973,
overhauled the individualist parameters and put in place a welfare state to pacify

and include the masses as citizens into society. Heavy infrastructure with largescale technological systems, welfare economics, and planning, Fordist organization of production, mass media, mass parties, and trade unions, these are some of the characteristics of organized modernity. Owing to its lack of flexibility, modernity hit its second crisis in the 1970s. Since that time, the ideological hegemony has shifted from the left to the right, from the state back to the market, and from solidarity to competition. Market principles have been introduced in all spheres of life – from economics, politics and the military to education, culture, and private life. By the 1980s, sociology started to feel the effects of the reflux of utopian

energies and entered into a crisis. Transposing debates about representation from the arts and philosophy, post-modernism questioned the very idea of a systematic sociological theory and intimated that modernity and sociology had reached an endpoint – end of an epoch, end of grand narratives, end of society. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that post-modernism was itself only a symptom of a more general 'cultural turn' within capitalism. The debate about 'late modernity', led by Giddens, Beck, Bauman, Touraine, and Castells was more serious. Proposing a sociology of post-modernism, decoding the latter as the cultural logic of late capitalism, it analyzed the changes in the economy and society, culture and identity which post-modernism had merely registered, and demonstrated that a sociology of post-modernity was not to be identified with a post-modern sociology. By the 1990´s, the fad of post-modernism was over and the debate took a distinctive spatial turn. Globalization became the central topic of sociological theory. In spite of the fact that sociology had a lot to contribute to the 'great globalization debate', it was quickly outflanked by international relations, international political economy, comparative politics, area studies, and anthropology with multi-sited ethnographies. By the time global studies had emerged as an interdiscipline with its own specialized literature, sociology entered once again into a serious crisis, this time for its alleged 'methodological nationalism' (A. Smith, H. Martins, U. Beck) which surreptitiously identifies society with the nation-state.

Globalization is a container term. Although it predominantly refers to a global "change of scale" that is arguably triggered by the restructurations of the economic realm, it is important not to reduce globalization to its economic dimension and to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that is able to take into account the economic as well as the social, cultural, political, technological, ecological, and legal dimensions of the accelerated 'time-space compression' we are witnessing today. As a catchword of our time, globalization not only refers to economic transformations across the globe, but to the conjunction and integration of the economic, digital, and biotechnological revolutions in a single revolution that is triggering an epochal civilization shift. Together, those three simultaneous revolutions are radically transforming the parameters of human existence and, uncontrolled, they may even put the survival of humanity at risk.

Capitalism was global from the very beginning, but today it functions as a single unit in real time on a planetary scale. The unification of capital markets, the liberalization of world trade, the internationalization of the division of labor, the global diffusion of consumerism, the culture of entrepreneurialism and, within the firm, decentralization, delocalization, vertical disintegration, networking, subcontracting, franchizing, and flexibilization of the labor force are global trends that one can witness locally, in the global cities in the center and the periphery. If post-Fordism focuses on the changes within the mode of production, post-industrialism stresses the changes in the forces of production and analyzes social change by foregrounding technology, especially information technology. Computers are relatively recent. It is only in the mid-eighties that they started to invade plants, offices, and private homes. We all do the same work: we sit in front of a screen and we frenetically type on a keyboard. Individually, we produce a text; collectively, we produce

text – a single, infinite text that is continuously produced and altered and of which

get glimpses on our screen. The computer connects bodies to machines, machines to minds, as well as other machines. Interconnected through the worldwide web, computers form a global network in which any node can be connected to another one which is part of the network. All spheres of life are progressively integrated into the cyberworld. One after the other, economy, finance, commerce, culture, science, education, communication, leisure, and pleasure go virtual. Since the code of DNA was 'cracked' by Watson and Crick in 1953, molecular biology has also entered the informational age. The human genome is a complex string of information that can be decoded, recoded, and recombined. IVF, stem cell technology and therapeutic cloning indicate that the biological sciences are no longer pure sciences. In conjunction with the bio-medical industry which promises cures for all kinds of illnesses, genomics has now reached the techno-scientific stage of industrial-medical application. Genomics is an anthropic technology of communication. The human body has become the frontier of advancing capitalism.

In my book on post-humanism I have tried to update the theory of reification (Vandenberghe, 2006a). The techno-capitalist revolutions of today bring into being new reifications that neither Marx nor Lukács nor the Frankfurt School had been able to foresee. The old concept of reification was forged to analyze the transformation of labor power into a commodity. As capitalism advances, it commodifies culture, nature and the self. Following the digital revolution, the commercialization of culture has progressed to the point that the cultural industry has now become an experience industry. Human experience has become the consummate commodity of the new capitalist economy. Whether it is music, games or films, cuisine, travel or theme parks, sports or gambling, what one pays for and what is marketed are not so much the goods and the services as the cultural experiences one consumes. By connecting the mind to the market and selling lived experiences, capitalism has colonized consciousness. Capitalism not only produces objects, but also subjects and subjectivities. It does not crush aspirations, but acknowledges and adjusts itself to them, while instrumentalizing and utilizing them for its own objectives. Translating and displacing the aspirations of autonomy, freedom, initiative, creativity, spontaneity, originality, and responsibility of the individual into a political program that aims to roll back the state, neo-liberalism has succeeded in turning the critique of alienation, domination, and bureaucracy to the advantage of the market. Having colonized the life-world, capitalism turns its attention to nature and invades life itself to modify and commodify it. The old reification transformed humans into things. The new one is more radical and simply scrambles the old ontological distinctions between the human, the animal, and the thing. The analysis of current developments in the bio-medical industry do not make one cheerful. In the name of health, all the taboos concerning human nature are lifted. Eugenics is coming back, but under a liberal and pastoral guise. The theories of the Frankfurt School were depressing, but in spite of all their metatheoretical shortcomings, they seem to have offered a brilliant anticipation of what was to come.

Rio de Janeiro, January 2008