A bridge over troubled water?

Pekka Kuusela

Nicos P. Mouzelis has written many books on social theory during the last two decades. In *Modern and Postmodern Social Theorizing* he makes an updated synthesis of his previous critical studies on the current state of modern and postmodern social theory, and attempts to show a way out of the deadlocks of some radical versions of sociological theorizing. Although Mouzelis writes in the introduction that his book is not a textbook, his study is a long and informative journey into the landscape of modern and postmodern theorizing. It ends with a methodological consideration of the implications of the ‘open-ended holistic paradigm’, as he calls his own orientation. In a way, Mouzelis’ book is a general overview of sociological theory from Talcott Parsons’ system functionalist orientation to Margaret Archer’s critical realism and a theoretical analysis of agency-structure problematics common to almost all sociological and organizational theories. So Mouzelis’ analysis is actually very ambitious. He deals with all the important sociological theories developed in European and North-American sociology before and after the Second World War. All the chapters are linked together with an idea of dealing with agency-structure problematics in different sociological theories. In this sense, his consideration offers a new interpretation of the problems of modern and postmodern social theories.

Mouzelis’ book is divided into short chapters which are organized into five main themes. These deal with the theoretical background of modern social theory, Parsonian and post-Parsonian developments, Giddens’ and Bourdieu’s social theories, bridges between modern and postmodern theorizing, and non-essentialist holism as a methodological standpoint in social theory. Instead of using long quotations from original studies, Mouzelis condenses the main ideas of different theories with some general observations on the quality of different social theories. This helps the reader to understand the broad spectrum of different orientations in sociological theorizing, but also opens up some critical questions concerning the possibility of making a coherent analysis of diverse orientations which have developed from various scientific traditions. But this holistic approach is not a novelty in social theory. Giddens’ theory of
structuration, which originally sought to provide a new understanding of structure-agency problematic in social theory, is perhaps the best example of this kind of orientation.

The key task in the first two parts of Mouzelis’ study is to map the role of Parsons’ theoretical thinking in social theory and to analyze the works of his followers, especially Jeffrey Alexander’s contribution to post-Parsonsian action theory. Mouzelis’ orientation is quite critical toward Parsons, although he also positively comments on Parsons’ views of societal development, which for him makes sense of the decline of Soviet socialism two decades ago. Mouzelis criticizes Parsons’ functionalist theory for adopting a too passive view of human subjects. Because of this, some of Parsons’ students also later rejected his action theory as an abstract and one-sided view of social world which did not give them suitable tools to analyze interaction between social agents. Mouzelis’ final conclusion of Parsons’ legacy and Alexander’s cultural sociology is, however, double-faced. On the one hand, Parsons could be seen as an important figure crossing the boundaries between different sociological traditions and developing a more elaborated action theory for the social sciences. On the other hand, although Alexander’s reformulations of post-Parsonian action theory provide resources to understand the autonomy of cultural sphere and its linkages with social structures, Alexander’s strong program of cultural sociology leaves open some crucial problems of social theory.

The main result of Mouzelis’ long journey into modern and postmodern social theory is that something is still missing from the main currents of sociological thinking. The missing element is a consistent explanation, how to connect the interaction level of analysis to the social system level of analysis. Therefore, Mouzelis underscores that Lockwood’s famous distinction into social and system integration is still useful and serves as a good analytical approach to analyze micro-scale interaction and macro-scale social processes. He stresses that Giddens, Habermas, or Bourdieu’s elaborations of Lockwood’s views do not provide help to override the question of subjective and objective perspective. According to Lockwood’s original formulation, social integration refers to orderly or conflictual relationships between actors, whereas system integration analyzes the relationships between the parts of the social system. Mouzelis states that this conceptual definition is still relevant for sociological analysis, making it possible to solve some enduring conceptual problems related to the analysis of human agency and the institutional level of action.

Mouzelis also criticizes Bourdieu’s sociological thinking. His social theory is more a theory on reproduction than transformation, Mouzelis (139) argues, and moreover claims that Bourdieu’s theory of practice ‘underemphasizes the rational, calculative and reflexive aspects of human action’. Therefore, the structure-disposition-practice scheme should be reformulated so that it takes seriously the reflexive, rational, and voluntaristic aspects of social action and the interactive-figurational structure of social games. As a conclusion, Mouzelis presents an elaborated version of Bourdieu’s theory of practice by separating analytically the time-dimension and the institutional and figurational structures. This model resembles Margaret Archer’s social theory, which is based on Rom Harre and Roy Bhaskar’s philosophical thinking. Mouzelis also critically
comments on Archer’s realist social theory in another part in his book and sees some conceptual ambiguities in Archer’s critical realist approach.

In the third part of his study, Mouzelis introduces an important critique of sociological modernization theory, cultural relativism, communitarism, and the anti-positivistic critique of objectivism. These questions are essential in order to understand the differences between modern and postmodern theorizing. First, as Mouzelis states, the problem with modernization theory is that it is a Eurocentric perspective in which Western capitalism is seen as highest form of social development. Mouzelis (147), however, stresses the point that ‘the Western modernity is just one form of modernity among others’. Second, in his critique of cultural relativism and authoritarian views typical of communitarism, Mouzelis defends the idea that from the evolutionist point of view Western societies are strongly interrelated. Therefore, it is wrong to speak about isolated communities as sources of values, as the communitarists do. Third, Mouzelis also criticizes some postmodern theorists who overstate their anti-empirical attitude and exaggerate the symbolic construction of social phenomena. According to a more balanced view, empirical verification is still an important element in the social sciences, and we should keep separate the symbolical nature of the social world and the empirical verification of social scientific theories. As Mouzelis (189) claims, ‘[s]ocial reality, although symbolically constructed, and although to some extent affected by second-order theories trying to explain it, should not be conflated with these theories’.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the final one, where Mouzelis presents a methodological view of his own. This methodological frame of reference is a more sophisticated model compared with existing social theories. It stresses the distinction between external and internal environments of action and takes into account both intra- and interactive processes while studying social phenomena. Mouzelis also clarifies his new methodological model by using some illuminating examples to clarify his ideas. But there is no simple road from abstract models to a concrete research agenda. The book ends with a chapter in which Mouzelis introduces twelve methodological rules for the construction of an open-ended holist paradigm for sociological and social theoretical research. According to Mouzelis (278), these rules ‘merely provide a set of guidelines for empirical investigation of social wholes (groups, communities, formal organizations, etc.) in a non-essentialist as well non-reductive manner’. This rather humble statement suggests that we need some methodological guidelines in order to make abstract principles more concrete in research work.

How does Mouzelis succeed in constructing bridges between different social theories? Is his study a bridge over the troubled water of modern and postmodern social theorizing? Maybe it is an exaggeration to speak about bridging in the sense of having solid ground for a non-essentialist social theory. Mouzelis’ methodological views are not new, and other social theorists have also stated comparable kinds of ideas. For example, Margaret Archer and Keith Sawyer’s social theories have similarities with Mouzelis’ own views. Generally speaking, Mouzelis manages to show some essential weaknesses in modern and postmodern social theories and points out that there is an urgent need for conceptual clarification of the key concepts of social theory. So one could say that, with Mouzelis’ analysis, we now have a surveyor’s map to build new bridges and to continue the investigation with clear landmarks.
the author

Pekka Kuusela, Pekka, PhD, Senior Lecturer, University of Eastern Finland, Department of Social Sciences.
E-mail: pekka.kuusela@uef.