By the same author

The Civilising Process

The Established and the Outsiders (with J. L. Scotson)

Die Höfische Gesellschaft

What Is Sociology?

Norbert Elias

Translated by Stephen Mennell
and Grace Morrissey

With a Foreword by Reinhard Bendix

Columbia University Press
New York 1978

Introduction

To understand what sociology is all about, one has to look at oneself from a distance, to see oneself as one human being among others. For sociology is concerned with problems of society, and society is something formed by oneself and other people together; the person who studies and thinks about society is himself a member of it. Thinking about oneself in contemporary society, it is often difficult to escape the feeling that one is facing other human beings just as if they were mere objects, separated from oneself by an unbridgeable gulf. This sense of separation is expressed, reproduced and reinforced through many current concepts and idioms, which make this modern mode of self-experience appear self-evident and incontestable. We speak of the individual and his environment, of the child and his family, of individual and society, or of subject and object, without clearly reminding ourselves that the individual forms part of his environment, his family, his society. Looking more closely, the so-called 'environment' of the child consists primarily of other human beings, of father, mother, brothers and sisters. What we conceptualize as 'family' would not be a family at all without children. Society, often placed in mental contraposition to the individual, consists entirely of individuals, oneself among them.

Yet our conventional instruments for thinking and speaking are generally constructed as though everything we experience as external to the individual were a thing, an 'object', and moreover a stationary object. Concepts like 'family' or 'school' plainly refer to groupings of interdependent human beings, to specific figurations which people form with each other. But our traditional manner of forming these concepts makes it appear as if groupings formed by interdependent human beings were pieces of matter – objects of the same kind as rocks, trees or houses. These traditional reifying ways of speaking, and corresponding tradi-

tional modes of thinking about groupings of people – even groupings to which one belongs oneself – manifest themselves in many ways, not least in the term 'society' and the way one handles it in one's thinking. It is customary to say that society is the 'thing' which sociologists investigate. But this reifying mode of expression greatly hampers and may even prevent one from understanding the nature of sociological problems.

The commonsense model which today dominates people's experience of their own, or any other individual's, relationship to society is naïvely egocentric, as indicated in Figure 1. Figura-

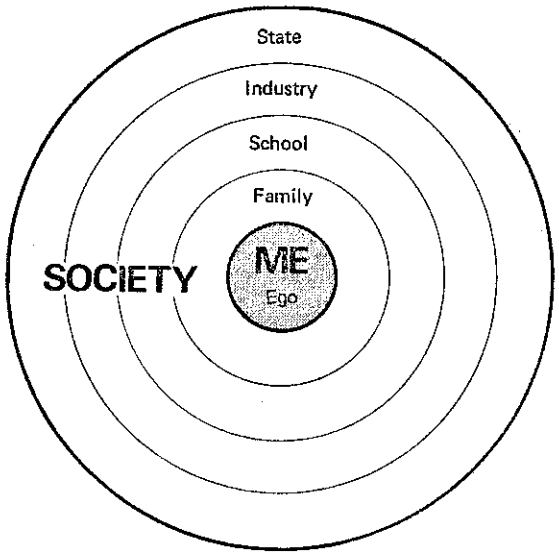

Fig 1 *Basic pattern of the egocentric view of society*

tions like university, town, system and countless others can be substituted for family, school, industry or state. Whatever they are, the predominant and typical way of conceptualizing such social groupings, and the mode of self-perception it expresses, generally corresponds to the diagram above, which shows the individual person, the particular ego, surrounded by social structures. These are understood to be objects over and above the individual ego. The concept of 'society' is also seen in this way.

To understand better the problematics of sociology, or what is usually referred to as its 'subject-matter', one needs to reorientate one's comprehension of the concept 'society', in the way

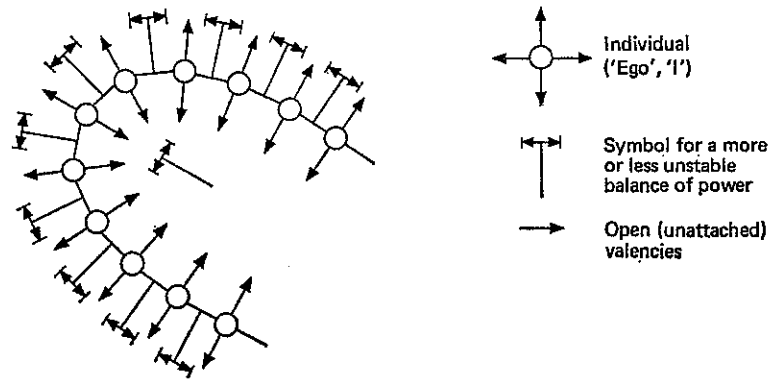

Fig 2 *A figuration of interdependent individuals ('family', 'state', 'group', 'society', etc.)*[1]*

implied by Figure 2. This diagram should help the reader to break through the brittle façade of reifying concepts which obscure and distort our understanding of our own life in society. Time and time again they encourage the impression that society is made up of structures external to oneself, the individual, and that the individual is at one and the same time surrounded by society yet cut off from it by some invisible barrier. As we shall see, these traditional ideas have to be replaced by a different, more realistic picture of people who, through their basic dispositions and inclinations, are directed towards and linked with each other in the most diverse ways. These people make up webs of interdependence or figurations of many kinds, characterized by power balances of many sorts, such as families, schools, towns, social strata, or states. Every one of these people is, as it is often put in a reifying manner, an ego or self. Among these people belongs also oneself.

To understand what sociology is all about one must, as we have said, be aware of oneself as a human being among other human beings. At first hearing, that sounds like a cliché. Villages and towns, universities and factories, estates and classes, families and occupational groups – all these are networks of individuals. Each one of us belongs among these individuals – that is what we express in saying '*my* village, *my* university, *my* class, *my* country'. At the level of everyday usage, such expres-

*Superior figures refer to *Notes and references* on pages 175-82.

sions are quite common and intelligible. Nevertheless, today, if we are trying to think in a scientific manner we usually forget that it is possible to refer to all social structures as 'mine', 'his', 'ours', 'yours' and 'theirs'. Instead, we habitually speak of all such structures as if they existed not only above and beyond ourselves but even above and beyond any actual people at all. In this type of thinking, it seems self-evident that on the one hand there is an 'I', or there are particular individuals, and on the other hand there is the social structure, the 'environment' which surrounds my own self and every other particular I.

There are many reasons for this; here we need only point towards an explanation. The peculiar constraint exerted by social structures over those who form them is particularly significant. We tend to explain away this compulsion by ascribing to these structures an existence – an objective reality – over and above the individuals who make them up. The prevailing ways of forming words and concepts further enhance the tendency in our thinking to reify and dehumanize social structures. This in turn leads to the characteristic 'metaphysic of social structures', now encountered as often in everyday thinking as in sociological thought. One of its most typical expressions is in the image of the relationship between individual and society symbolized in Figure 1.

This metaphysic is further sustained by the automatic displacement of ways of thinking and speaking first developed and tested in the investigation of natural relationships in physics and chemistry, into the investigation of social relationships between individuals. Before a scientific approach to natural events became possible, people explained the natural forces to which they felt subject in terms of modes of thinking and speaking that had arisen out of their experience of interpersonal forces. The sun and earth, or storms and earthquakes, which nowadays we understand as manifestations of natural physico-chemical forces, they interpreted in terms of their own immediate experience of human and social phenomena. They saw them either as persons or as the results of the actions and designs of persons. Only gradually did the transition come about from magical and metaphysical thinking to scientific thinking about the physico-chemical aspects of the world. The change was to a large degree dependent on the fading away of heteronomous, naïvely egocentric explanatory models, the functions of which were assumed by other models

of speech and thought corresponding more closely to the immanent dynamics of natural events.

In trying to enlarge our understanding of human and social processes and to acquire a growing fund of more reliable knowledge about them – this in itself is one of the main objects of sociology – we are confronted with a similar task of emancipation. In this sphere, too, people find themselves subjected to 'compelling forces'. They seek to understand them so that with the help of this knowledge they may gain some control over the blind course of these compelling forces, the effects of which for them are often senseless and destructive, causing much suffering. The aim is to guide these forces in such a way as to make them less meaningless and less wasteful of lives and resources. It is therefore central to the tasks of sociological teaching and research to acquire a general understanding of these forces and an increase in dependable knowledge about them through specialized fields of investigation.

The first step does not seem very difficult. It is not hard to grasp the idea that what we attempt to conceptualize as social forces are in fact forces exerted by people over one another and over themselves. Yet as soon as we try to proceed from here, we find that the social apparatus for thinking and speaking places at our disposal only either models of a naïvely egocentric or magico-mythical kind, or else models from natural science. We encounter the former whenever people try to explain the compelling forces stemming from the figurations they and other people form together, entirely in terms of the personal character or the personal aims and intentions of *other* individuals or groups of individuals. This urge to except oneself or one's own group from explanation in terms of figurations formed with other people is very common, and it is one of the many manifestations of naïve egocentricity or (what is much the same) naïve anthropomorphism which still permeate our thought and speech about social processes. These naïvely egocentric modes of expression are mixed with others which, modelled on the vocabulary used to explain compelling forces of nature, are now used to explain the compelling forces found in society.

There has been a trend towards 'scientificization' of modes of speaking and thinking about what is now known to be inanimate nature, in sharp distinction from the human-social world. Many verbal and conceptual structures derived from the uncovering of

physical and chemical structures have passed into the everyday stock of words and concepts of European society and taken root there. Numerous words and concepts, the present-day forms of which derive primarily from the interpretation of natural events, have been transferred unobtrusively to the interpretation of human and social phenomena. Together with the various manifestations of magico-mythical thought, they contribute to the perpetuation of many customary modes of speech and thought for tackling problems in the human sciences to which they are plainly unsuited. They thus hinder the development of more autonomous ways of speaking and thinking, better suited to the special peculiarities of human figurations.

The tasks of sociology therefore include not only examination and interpretation of specific compelling forces to which people are exposed in their particular empirically observable societies and groups, but also the freeing of speech and thought about such forces from their links with earlier heteronomous models. In place of words and concepts bearing the mark of their origin in magico-mythical ideas or in natural science, sociology must gradually develop others which do better justice to the peculiarities of human social figurations.

This would be less difficult if today we already had a clear picture of the corresponding phase in the development of the natural sciences, when new and more adequate means of speaking and thinking replaced the older magico-mythical ones. Of this, however, we know very little. Many of the gradually developed fundamental concepts of the scientific knowledge of nature proved again and again to be more or less appropriate in the observation and manipulation of physico-chemical processes. For this very reason, these fundamental concepts appear to their inheritors to be eternally valid and, therefore, eternal. The corresponding scientific words, categories and modes of thought seem so self-evident that it is easy to imagine that every human being knew them intuitively. It took numerous generations of scientists much hard thought and observation, arduous and often very dangerous struggles to develop ideas like those of mechanical causality or the non-intentional, aimless and unplanned lawfulness of nature. Only very slowly and with great difficulty did these ideas emerge out of anthropomorphic and egocentric ideas and ways of thinking. Then finally the new ideas diffused outwards from a small élite, until they informed the everyday thought and speech of

whole social groups. Now they often appear to subsequent generations to be simply 'true', 'rational' or 'logical' ideas and modes of thought. By and large they stand the test of constant observation and action, and we therefore no longer ask how and why human thinking about this particular level of integration in the cosmos has become so well adapted to its purpose.

Therefore, it emerges that these social developments of speech and thought about the compelling forces of natural processes have been neglected as a subject for sociological research. The static philosophical idea of scientific knowledge as an 'eternally human' form of knowledge has almost completely inhibited inquiry into the sociogenesis and psychogenesis of the scientific vocabulary and modes of speech and thought. Yet only investigations such as these will put us on the right track in explaining this reorientation of human thought and experience. The problem is usually discounted before it is posed, because it is seen as 'merely an historical matter', as opposed to so-called problems of systematic theory. But this distinction is itself an illustration of the inadequacy of natural scientific models for comprehending long-term social processes, of which the scientificization of thought is one. Such processes are quite different from what is called the history of science, as contrasted with an apparently immutable philosophy of science, just as natural history used to be contrasted with the study of the apparently immutable solar system.

Corresponding to this failure to investigate problems of long-term processes of social development, we still lack a general understanding of the long-term reorientation of language and thought in European societies, to which the rise of the natural sciences would be central. Such an understanding is essential if we are to gain a clearer and more vivid picture of the transformation. It would also make it much easier for people to understand that sociology has now reached a new level of experience and awareness. With constant feedback from the increasing volume of empirical research we can now discard many traditional models of knowledge and thought, and over the years develop in their place other instruments for speaking and thinking, better suited to the scientific investigation of human social figurations.

Emancipation from heteronomous ideas, with their concomitant modes of speech and thought, is scarcely easier for the human sciences than it was for the natural sciences two or three centuries ago. Those espousing the cause of the natural sciences then had

no choice but to start by combating institutionalized magico-mythical models of perception and thought; protagonists of the social sciences today must now also struggle against the heteronomous use of natural scientific models which have become just as firmly institutionalized.

Even bearing in mind that social forces are forces exerted by people over themselves and over one another, it is still very difficult when thinking and speaking to guard against the social pressure of verbal and conceptual structures. These make social forces seem like forces exerted on objects in nature – like forces external to people, exerted over them as 'objects'. Too often we speak and think as though not just mountains, clouds and storms, but also villages and states, the economy and politics, factors of production and technological advances, the sciences and the industrial system, among countless other social structures, were all extra-human entities with their own inner laws and thus quite independent of human action or inaction. They appear, in the sense of Figure 1, to be 'society' or 'the environment', exerting influence over every human being, every single 'I'. Many of the nouns that are used in the social sciences – and in everyday speech – are formed and used as if they referred to material things, visible and tangible objects in time and space, existing independently of people.

However, that is not to say that we could already manage the business of teaching and research without this kind of word and concept structure. No matter how painfully aware we are of their inadequacy, more adequate means of thought and communication are in many instances simply not available at present. We might consistently try to free the current stock of language and knowledge, now used to extend our understanding of human networks and social figurations, from heteronomous models of speech and thought. We might try to substitute more autonomous models for them. Yet any such attempt would at present be doomed to failure. Certain social transformations can only be achieved, if at all, by long and sustained development spanning several generations. This reorientation of speech and thought is one of them. It requires much linguistic and conceptual innovation. Rushing it would jeopardize its chances of being understood at the present time. Of course, in favourable circumstances single neologisms can pass into social usage very quickly. But affinity and understanding for new ways of speaking and thinking never develop

without conflict with older and more familiar ones. What is necessary is a reorganization of perception and thought on the part of all the many interdependent people in a society. If a great many people are to relearn and rethink all this and to accustom themselves to a whole complex of new concepts – or old concepts with new meanings – then a time-span of two or three generations is usually needed, sometimes much longer. For all that, a clearer view of the common task in hand may perhaps facilitate and speed up a reorientation even of such a magnitude. My purpose here is to contribute to this clarification.

With this purpose in mind, a discussion of the difficulty and slowness of such a reorientation of social language and thought may itself give an impression of the kind of forces which people exert over each other. It would be less difficult to understand that such forces are quite distinctive, if our language and thought were not so thoroughly permeated with words and concepts like 'casual necessity', 'determinism', 'scientific law' and others of the same sort. These denote models derived from practical experience in the realm of natural science, of physics and chemistry. Later they have been transferred to other areas of experience, for which they were not originally intended at all, among them the realm of human relationships which we call society. In the process, awareness of their original connections with discoveries about physico-chemical sequences of events has been lost. So now they seem to be quite general concepts, even to some extent *a priori* conceptions of how events are connected; all men seem to possess them as part of their innate 'commonsense' or 'reason', independent of experience.

In most cases, when entering a new area of experience, one is simply faced with a lack of concepts appropriate to the types of forces and relationships encountered there. Take for example the notion of 'force'. Our use of a common language to communicate with each other exerts a kind of force over the speech and thought of individual people. This kind of force is of a quite different type from, for example, the force of gravity which, in accordance with scientific laws, pulls a ball back to earth when it is thrown high in the air. Yet what distinctive and special concepts are available today which can express this difference clearly and intelligibly? Scientific societies perhaps have greater scope for making linguistic and intellectual innovations than do other types of society. Even so, their scope is not unlimited. If it is stretched

too far, there is a risk of failing to be understood by other people. Furthermore, one's own speech and thought is normally controlled by others, and if this control is broken entirely, one also runs the risk of losing control over oneself, or losing oneself in limitless speculation, in fantasies, and playing around with ideas. It is very difficult to steer a course between the Scylla of physics and the Charybdis of metaphysics.

Too much should not be expected from a single book. Such a truly radical reorientation and renewal as is now beginning, heralded by efforts to define social relationships sociologically, cannot be sustained throughout by the imaginative and inventive powers of any one individual. It needs the convergent efforts of many people. In the end, the critical factor is the direction of overall social development – the development of the human network as a whole. A strong wave of new ideas may influence the course of overall social development, provided that fluctuating trends in the distribution of power and consequent struggles for power do not bring reorientation to a complete standstill and destroy the impulse behind it. In their present situation, the social sciences encounter the same difficulty which afflicted the natural sciences during the centuries of their rise: that the greater the anger and passion aroused by the conflict, the less the chance of a changeover to more realistic, less fantasy-laden thinking. And the more fantasy-laden – the further from reality – their thinking, the more uncontrollable are people's anger and passion. In antiquity, a conception of nature more in keeping with reality arose briefly; but it was subsequently destroyed by the onset of a new bout of mythologizing connected with the absorption of smaller, self-governing states by great imperial states. This shows how fragile and precarious a premature attempt at change can be. Another example is the development of utopian ideas out of scientific social thought during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both examples point to a vicious circle which is itself one of the compelling forces in need of more precise investigation. Some reference to it may shed a little light on the trend towards scientificization of thought, which has not as yet received the attention it deserves.[2]

One characteristic which distinguishes the scientific from the prescientific way of acquiring knowledge is that the scientific is more closely connected with the real world of objects. The scientific way gives people a chance to distinguish more clearly,

as they proceed, between fanciful and realistic ideas. At first hearing, that may sound over-simplified. The strong current of philosophical nominalism, which still swamps and obscures epistemological thought, has brought concepts like 'reality' and 'fact' into disrepute. But the question here is not one of philosophical speculation, whether of a nominalist or a positivist kind, but of establishing something about the theory of science that can be verified by detailed observations, and if necessary revised. At one time, people imagined that the moon was a goddess. Today we have a more adequate, more realistic idea of the moon. Tomorrow it may be discovered that there are still elements of fantasy in our present idea of the moon, and people may develop a conception of the moon, the solar system and the whole universe still closer to reality than ours. The comparative which qualifies this assertion is important; it can be used to steer ideas between the two towering, unmoving philosophical cliffs of nominalism and positivism, to keep in the current of the long-term development of knowledge and thought. We are describing the direction of this current in calling special attention to the decrease in the fanciful elements and increase in the realistic elements in our thinking, as characteristics of the scientificization of our ways of thinking and acquiring knowledge. To investigate changes in the balance, the relative frequency and weight of elements of fantasy and of realism in our accepted ideas about human societies would require far closer study than is possible here. Both concepts are many-layered. That of fantasy, for example, can refer to individual dreams, to day-dreams and wish-fulfilment, to imaginative expression through art, to metaphysical speculation, to collective belief-systems or ideologies, and much else besides.

One kind of fantasy, however, played a quite indispensable role in the process of scientificization and the process by which people gained increasing mastery over reality. That was the kind of fantasy which was both kept in check and made fruitful by close contact with factual observation. Nominalist philosophers as a rule disdain to draw the complex relation of fact and fantasy into their meditations and to assimilate it conceptually. Consequently they are hardly in a position to explain to their audience the effects of the increasing scientificization of thinking about non-human natural phenomena. As this process continues, with constant feedback on to practical affairs, it may increase people's chances of avoiding danger from natural events, and their chances

of turning towards goals of their own choosing. For example, how can the improvement in standards of living and health in many societies be explained, except by our knowledge and thinking about these fields having become less emotionally-charged and fantasy-laden, less magico-mythical and more objective and realistic?

Nowadays many people, including sociologists, talk about the sciences with noticeable discomfort, sometimes even with a certain contempt. 'What have all these scientific discoveries – machines, factories, cities, nuclear bombs and all the other horrors of scientific warfare – done for us?' they ask. This argument is a typical example of the suppression of an unwelcome explanation and the substitution of a more welcome one (a process called 'displacement'). The hydrogen bomb was after all developed at the instigation of statesmen, who would be the ones to order its use if they thought it necessary. Yet to us the nuclear bomb serves as a kind of fetish, an object onto which we project our fears, while the real danger lies in the reciprocal hostility displayed by groups of people in their relations with each other. To some extent even their hostility makes the hostile groups dependent on each other, and they can become so deeply enmeshed in it that they can no longer see any way out of the situation. We blame the bomb, and the scientists whose reality-orientated research made it possible, as a pretext for concealing from ourselves our complicity in the reciprocal hostility, or at least our individual helplessness in the face of the apparent inevitability of threat and counter-threat. By blaming the scientists, we also evade our obligation to seek a more realistic explanation of the social entanglements which lead to a gradually escalating exchange of threats between groups of people. The complaint that we have become 'slaves of the machine' or of technology is similar. Despite science-fiction nightmares, machines have no will of their own. They can neither invent nor produce themselves, and cannot compel us to serve them. All decisions and activities they carry out are human decisions and activities. We project threats and compulsions on to them, but if we look more closely we always see interdependent groups of people threatening and compelling each other by means of machines. When people blame their uneasiness about life in scientific-technical-industrial societies on to bombs or machines, scientists or engineers, they are evading the difficult and maybe unpleasant task of seeking a clearer, more realistic interpretation

of the structure of human interweavings and particularly of the patterns of conflict rooted in them. It is this structure which is responsible for the development and eventual use of scientific weapons of war, and for the hardships of life in factories and modern metropolises. Technological developments do indeed influence the direction in which human interweavings develop. But the technical 'thing in itself' is never the source of the compelling forces and hardship to which people are subject; these are always caused by the way people apply technology and fit it into the social framework. What we need to fear is not the destructive power of the nuclear bomb but that of human beings, or more accurately of human interweavings. The danger lies not in the progress of science and technology, but in the manner in which research findings and technological inventions are used by people under the pressure of their entangled interdependence, and in the associated struggles over the distribution of power chances of all kinds. In the following pages of this introduction to sociology, little will be said about these acute problems. The foremost concern of this book is to promote the development of sociological imagination and thinking towards a perception of these interweavings and figurations which people form. But a reminder about the acute problems which afflict social interweavings may be useful as an introduction.

The mental fixation on familiar and tangible phenomena like nuclear bombs and machines or, in a broader sense, on science and technology, obscuring the social causes of fear and unease, is symptomatic of one of the fundamental characteristics of our age. That is the discrepancy between, on the one hand, our relatively great ability nowadays to overcome – appropriately and realistically – problems caused by extra-human natural events, and, on the other hand, our comparatively limited ability to solve problems of human coexistence with anything approaching the same reliability.

In an odd way, we have double standards for thought, for perception, for the acquisition of knowledge and for knowledge itself. In the field of natural phenomena, all these processes are highly and increasingly realistic. This field may be infinite. But within it, the fund of relatively reliable, more realistic scientific knowledge grows continuously and cumulatively. The standard of self-discipline is relatively high, and personal egocentric views are counteracted by a relatively effective mutual control on the part

of all investigators, directing their observations and thought primarily to the objects of investigation. There is relatively little latitude for egocentric or ethnocentric fantasies to influence the results of research, as they are held in check by careful comparison at each phase of a piece of research, and discounted. The high degree of self-control in consideration of natural phenomena, and the corresponding degree of object-centredness, realism and 'rationality' of thought and action in these fields, is no longer the monopoly of specialist researchers. They are now basic attitudes held by people in all the more developed industrial societies. In so far as our whole lives, even their most private aspects, have been technologized, these principles govern all our thoughts and actions. However, in our private lives there is still room for egocentric fantasies about natural phenomena, but people are quite often aware of them as just that – as personal fantasies.

In contrast, in the same societies there is still immense scope for egocentric and ethnocentric fantasies to constitute decisive factors in perception, thought and action in areas of social life unrelated to scientific and technological problems. In the social sciences, not even researchers have at their disposal common standards for mutual control and self-control which would allow them to scrutinize their colleagues' work as confidently as can their counterparts in the natural sciences. Nor is it so easy for them to distinguish between arbitrary personal fantasies or political and nationalistic ideals on the one hand, and reality-orientated theoretical models verifiable by empirical investigation on the other. And in society at large, social standards of thought about social problems still permit people to some extent to surrender to their own fantasies, without recognizing them as such. This recalls the extent of fantasies about natural events in the Middle Ages. In medieval times strangers, particularly Jews, were held responsible for outbreaks of the plague, and large groups of them were massacred. At that time people knew of no more realistic, scientific explanations to account for events like mass deaths in epidemics. As so often happens, the ruling groups poured their anxiety, as yet unchecked by more realistic knowledge, their fear of the inexplicable horrors of the plague, and their passionate anger at what they perceived as an incomprehensible attack, into fantasies in which they saw outsiders and socially weaker groups as the source of their own sufferings. The result was mass murder. During the nineteenth century, European societies were attacked by several waves of cholera epidemics. Thanks to the increase in state supervision of public health matters, and to the progress of scientific knowledge and the diffusion of scientific explanations of epidemics, this kind of large-scale infectious disease was finally brought under control. In the twentieth century, both the adequacy of science and the level of social prosperity have increased and made it possible to turn theories of public hygiene into practice by preventive measures. So for the first time since population densities began to increase, people living in Europe are at last almost entirely free from the threat of epidemic disease, and have almost forgotten about it. Yet our thoughts and actions with regard to human social coexistence are still at the same stage of development as medieval thought and behaviour with regard to the plague. In social matters, people are exposed even today to pressures and anxieties they cannot comprehend. Since people in distress are unable to live without some explanation, the gaps in understanding are filled out by fantasy.

In our time, the National Socialist myth was an example of this kind of interpretation of social distress and unrest, from which it sought relief through action. Here too, just as in the case of the plague, anxiety and unrest about social miseries found release in fantasy-laden explanations identifying socially weak minorities as the troublemakers and culprits, so leading to their slaughter. Thus we can see how it is characteristic of our times that a highly factual realistic grasp of physical and technical matters should exist alongside fantasy-laden solutions to social problems, which as yet we are either unwilling or unable to explain and overcome more adequately.

The National Socialist hope of solving social problems by exterminating the Jews seems a rather extreme example of what is in fact a universally prevalent feature of the present-day social life of mankind. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the function of fantasy-riddled explanations of social distress and anxiety, the real explanations of which we cannot or will not perceive. At the same time, it is symptomatic of a significant dualism in contemporary thought that a cloak of natural scientific, biological respectability should have to be draped round a social fantasy.

The word 'fantasy' sounds harmless enough. That fantasies play an indispensable, highly constructive role in human life is not disputed here. Like the ability to present many different facial expressions, to smile or to weep, the highly developed capacity for

fantasy is a uniquely human characteristic. But here we refer to fantasy of a particular type, or more accurately to fantasies which are wrongly applied to social life. When not controlled by factual knowledge, this type of fantasy is, especially in a situation of crisis, among the most unreliable, often most murderous impulses governing human action. In such situations, people need not be insane for these impulses to be let loose.

Nowadays, we often like to think that the element of fantasy, which plays an important part in directing a group's common actions and ideas towards its goals, is merely a blind – nothing more than an alluring, exciting mask of propaganda. We imagine that cunning leaders use it to conceal their boldly-conceived aims which in terms of their 'own interests' are highly 'rational' or 'realistic'. Of course, that does sometimes happen. But when we use the concept of 'reason' in expressions like 'reasons of state', the concept of 'realism' in terms like *'Realpolitik'*, and many other similar concepts, we help to reinforce the widespread idea that rational, objective or realistic considerations are usually the main ones when groups of people quarrel. The use to which the concept of ideology is put – even by sociologists – shows the same tendency. But, on closer investigation, it is not very difficult to see the great extent to which both realistic and fantasy-laden ideas pervade the conception of 'group interests'. Realistic, methodical plans for social change – even makeshift ones – drawn up with the help of scientific models of development, are an innovation of very recent origin. Often the developmental models themselves are plainly still very imperfect, and do not yet correspond closely enough to the changing social structures to which they refer. The whole of history has so far amounted to no more than a graveyard of human dreams. Dreams often find short-term fulfilment; but in the long run, they virtually always seem to end up drained of substance and meaning and so destroyed. The reason is that aims and hopes are so heavily saturated with fantasy that the actual course of events in society deals them blow after blow, and the shock of reality reveals them as unreal, in fact as dreams. The peculiar sterility of many analyses of ideologies largely stems from the tendency to treat them as basically rational structures of ideas coinciding with actual group interests. Their burden of affect and fantasy, their egocentric or ethnocentric lack of reality are overlooked, for they are assumed to be merely a calculated camouflage for a highly rational core.

As an example, consider the situation of conflict between the Great Powers which has persisted since the Second World War and which increasingly influences and overshadows conflicts within other states all over the world. The representatives of each of the Great Powers seem to imagine that they possess a unique national charisma and that they and their ideals alone are fitted for world leadership. It is very difficult to discover any realistic conflicts of interest which would account for the enormous escalation in preparations for war. The practical social differences between them are obviously much smaller than would be expected, bearing in mind the sharp contrasts between their belief systems and ideals. More than any conflict of interests that could be called 'real', it is a collision between the dreams of the Great Powers – and not only the great ones – which makes them so harshly and unremittingly hostile to each other. This now almost world-wide polarization has a considerable structural resemblance to an earlier European polarization when the dreams of Protestant and Catholic princes and generals came into collision. In those days, people were as passionately eager to kill each other wholesale for the sake of their belief systems as they now seem willing to kill wholesale for the reason that some prefer the Russian belief system, some the American or the Chinese. As far as one can see, it is mainly the contradiction between the belief systems of national states and their charismatic sense of national mission which renders this kind of interweaving opaque and incomprehensible to those caught up in them, and which therefore makes them uncontrollable. (The national belief systems, incidentally, have little to do with Marx's analysis of class antagonisms within states, an analysis that at his time was highly appropriate.)

This too is an example of the dynamics of social interweavings, the systematic investigation of which is the concern of sociology. At this level, the figurations are composed of interdependent groups of people, organized into national states, and not of single interdependent individuals. But here, too, the units to which people refer in the first person – not only the singular 'I' but also the plural 'we' – are experienced by them as if they were completely autonomous. As schoolchildren they were already learning that their own national state possessed unlimited 'sovereignty', that it was completely independent of all other states. The ethnocentric image of humanity divided into national states is analogous with the egocentric image expressed in Figure 1. The

ruling élites and many of their followers in each nation (or at least in each Great Power) imagine themselves to be in the centre of humanity as if in a fortress, contained and surrounded by all the other nations, yet at the same time cut off from them. In this case too, the stage of self-awareness in thought and action expressed in Figure 2, but with nations as the basic units instead of single people, is scarcely ever reached.

At present, the conception of one's own nation as one among many other interdependent ones, and an understanding of the structure of the figurations they all form, has hardly begun to develop. It is rare to come across a clear sociological model of the dynamics of relationships between states. Take for example the dynamics of the 'cold war' between the Great Powers. Both sides involved in it seek to increase their own power potential out of fear of the power potential of their opponent. Thus their fears of each other are vindicated and they drive themselves on to increase their own power potential even further, which in turn spurs their opponent on to make a corresponding effort. Since no arbiter commands sufficient power chances to break this deadlock, unless both sides *simultaneously* gain an insight into the immanent dynamics of the figuration they form together, its compelling forces make further efforts to increase power potentials quite inevitable. But the interdependent opponents, and especially the party oligarchs on every side, do not attain this insight. Rather their dominant belief is that their own danger and constant efforts to increase their power potential can be fully explained by pointing to the other side, the opponents of the moment, with their 'wrong social system' and 'dangerous national beliefs'. Nations are as yet unable to see themselves as integral components of a figuration, the dynamics of which are compelling them to make these efforts. The rigidity of the polarized national belief system prevents the ruling party oligarchs from seeing sufficiently clearly that they themselves, their party traditions and the social ideals by which they justify their claims to rule, are constantly losing credibility. This credibility gap is caused by their actually helping to bring about dangerous confrontation in war, by their wasting on war materials the resources created by human labour, and ultimately by their actual use of force. Here again, this time in paradigmatic form, we find a highly realistic mastery of the physico-technological environment existing side by side with an extremely fantasy-laden approach to interpersonal, social, problems.

Looking around, it is not hard to find still further examples of this discrepancy. Nevertheless, many people today believe that it is possible to approach social problems from the standpoint of their own inborn 'rationality', quite independent of the current state of development of social knowledge and thought, yet with the same 'objective' approach that a physicist or engineer brings to scientific or technological problems.

Thus contemporary governments commonly assert – perhaps in good faith – that they can overcome the acute social problems of their country 'rationally' or 'realistically'. In fact, however, they usually fill the gaps in our still fairly rudimentary factual knowledge of the dynamics of social interweavings with dogmatic doctrines, handed-down nostrums, or considerations of short-term party interests. Taking measures mostly by chance, they remain at the mercy of events, the sequence of which governments understand as little as those they govern. The governed, meanwhile, submit to their leaders, trusting them to conquer the hazards and difficulties confronting society, and at least to know where they are going. As for the machinery of government, the bureaucracy, perhaps it is not out of place to say what Max Weber probably meant, that the structure of bureaucracies and the attitudes of bureaucrats have become more rational by comparison with previous centuries; but it is hardly appropriate to claim, as Max Weber actually did, that contemporary bureaucracy *is* a rational form of organization and that the behaviour of its officials *is* rational behaviour. That is highly misleading. For example, to mention but one aspect, bureaucracy tends to reduce complex social interdependencies to single administrative departments, each with its own strictly defined area of jurisdiction, and staffed by hierarchies of specialists and oligarchies of administrative chiefs who rarely think beyond their own areas of command. This kind of bureaucracy is far closer in character to a traditional organization which has never been properly thought out, than to a clearly thought-out, rational organization whose suitability for its function is constantly under review.

This will have to suffice. With the aid of such examples, certain central sociological concerns may perhaps be seen more clearly. The fact that human societies are made up of human beings, of ourselves, leads us to forget all too easily that their development, structures, and functions are no less unknown to us than the development, structures and functions of the physico-chemical

and biological planes. And it is just as important that there should be gradually increasing understanding of all planes. Our contacts with each other are so ordinary and everyday that they can easily mask the fact that at present we ourselves are the least explored subject of research; we are as blank a space on the map of human knowledge as the poles of the earth or the face of the moon. Many people are afraid of exploring this region further, just as people used to fear scientific discoveries about the human organisms. And, just as before, a few argue that the scientific investigation of people by people – something they do not want – is simply not possible. But as men, lacking any more solidly founded understanding of the dynamics of the interweavings they form with each other, drift helplessly from small to ever greater acts of self-destruction, and from one lapse into meaninglessness to the next, so romantic ignorance loses much of its charm as a licence for dreams.