3 Social and System Integration: Back to Lockwood

The previous chapter partly revolved around a discussion of the system/social-integration distinction in relation to Giddens’ structuration theory. It was argued that Giddens’ attempt to link system integration with macro, and social integration with micro (defining the micro-macro distinction in terms of the respective difference between ‘social interaction where others are present and social interaction with others who are absent’) has not been very successful. This is hardly surprising, since identifying micro with ‘presence-availability’ in social interaction is not only unhelpful but downright misleading.

An earlier and more useful formulation of the system- and social-integration distinction is to be found in David Lockwood’s attempt to link social integration with relationships between actors (micro or macro), and system integration with relationships between a social system’s institutionalised parts (again, irrespective of whether such parts are constituents of micro or macro social systems).

In fact, it seems to me that Lockwood’s distinction between social and system integration is one of the most important contributions in the field of sociological theory. It is important, first, because it points out clearly where the most fundamental split in sociology lies today: between those who place individual and/or collective actors at the centre of their analysis, and those who relegate actors to the periphery and view society primarily in terms of institutions. Secondly, it is important because it gives detailed suggestions on how to build a bridge between these two approaches – suggestions that go beyond the usual textbook clichés on the compatibility between the two and the need for synthesis. Thirdly, the distinction is extremely useful for empirical studies of social change. It provides practical guidelines, it indicates what things should be looked at and what questions asked when one is studying the development or change of specific social systems – whether groups, organisations, or whole societies. Finally, as I shall show in the two chapters to follow, any attempt at a rapprochement between macro- and micro-sociologies cannot do without a serious consideration of both the
system-and social-integration dimensions of social life.

There are, however, certain ambiguities and shortcomings in Lockwood's distinction which considerably restrict its applicability. This chapter tries to identify and discuss some of these difficulties with the aim, not of dismissing the distinction but, hopefully, of increasing its utility as a guide to research.

1 LOCKWOOD'S BASIC FORMULATION

For Lockwood the 'problem of social integration focusses attention upon the orderly or conflictual relationships between the parts of a social system'. In his view, conflict theories concentrate on problems of social integration: they emphasise group conflicts as a basic mechanism of change; whereas normative functionalists underemphasise actors and pay attention to problems of integration or mal-integration between parts. But 'parts' (as distinct from actors) can be viewed in different ways, and it is here that some interesting problems arise.

Lockwood seems to distinguish two types of system integration, depending on what kind of 'parts' they refer to. The one type is to be found in the writings of normative functionalists, where the parts of the system are institutions. This gives rise to system contradictions due to institutional incompatibilities: that is, certain institutional patterns clash, or are incompatible with other institutional patterns.

Lockwood holds that 'such institutional patterns do not exhaust the generally relevant parts of a social system', and that there is another useful way of conceptualising parts and another type of system integration. This can be found in, for example, Marx's analysis of contradiction between 'property institutions' and the 'forces of production', and more generally in his conceptualisation of society in terms of material substructure and superstructure – or, in Lockwood's formulation, in terms of society's material base and its core institutional complex. When 'parts' are viewed in such terms, this conduces to a concept of system integration (and of system contradictions or incompatibilities) quite different from that used by normative functionalists. According to Lockwood, Marx was successful in combining this second type of system-integration analysis with an analysis on the level of social integration (that is, in terms of collective actors). In fact, the Marxist theory of change links systematically and successfully system contradictions (for example, between advanced technology and capitalist institutions of private property) with concrete groups or quasi-groups which, under the pressure of such contradictions and