THE MASTERING OF COMPLEXITY AS A PROBLEM OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

I

ABSTRACT. The main purpose of this paper is the old methodological problem of the mastering of complexity in the Social Sciences. In sociology the traditional solution is displayed by some methods for the external reduction of complexity. Although some authors in the history of sociology tried to formulate a heuristic program for an empirical-analytical action science, they finally became victims of their own criticism of previous sociology: to simplify the social reality instead of establishing an increasing capacity of complexity for ‘societal-theory’ building. This more historical aspect and first part of this paper is followed by some newer methodological reflections: to increase the capacity of complexity by a strategy of internal reduction of complexity or better: internal complexity processing. Instead of simplification the strategy of differentiation is proposed.

It certainly is no accident that since some time in sociology a movement has taken place towards the analysis of total societies and the relations among their parts. It is clear that this development which has often other terms correlates with actual trends leading towards comprehensive social planning. It correlates also with an increasing competition between East and West which exceeds the limits of military confrontation and leads to a growing political relevance of economical and social changes in the Third World.

For sociology this development does not only involve mobilizing a ‘fresh start’ and the chance of an increasing social importance. On the contrary “the renaissance of the macrosociological analysis of development” brings a revival of older and an increase of newer methodological problems. Basically it deals with the fact that on the one hand one must not forget the theories of older sociology, and that on the other – in linear opposition – this renaissance must not become unexpectedly a relapse into the so often criticized faults and deficiencies of these theories. Strictly speaking it pays for one to question the criticism of the older theory where it tried to corrupt completely the suppositions of the possibility of macrosociological theory under the catchword of a ‘positivistic revolution’.

This multidimensional problem cannot be merged in the debate between ‘logical positivism’ (or/and ‘critical rationalism’) and ‘dialectic’ which
already has become traditional in the meantime. In spite of the fact that discussions of these standpoints have fixed a "permanent dualism" in the methodological awareness especially in Western German sociology they represent only aspects with regard to those problems which the "renaissance of macrosociological development analysis" has brought with. The debate about positivism in German Sociology up to now led to the formulation of different programmes of knowledge which are not sufficient for a macrosociology with the character of an empirical-analytic action science of social change. That does not mean that these programmes are irrelevant for macrosociology. Nevertheless a macrosociology which masters the criteria of an empirical-analytical action science seems to require specific demands. To show this is the purpose of the following inquiry.

II

When the two hundred years old development of European sociology is regarded a number of paradox discoveries can be made. European sociology in the ‘age of enlightenment’ appears as a philosophy of history with practical intention which feels to be obliged to the heuristic programme of contemporary natural sciences. This philosophy of history confesses to the principle of a ‘physique sociale’ which works with experimental methods open to everybody as the natural sciences have formed them in contrast to the hierocratic medieval metaphysics. It wants to formulate ‘laws’, which base historical change, and visualize the goal and the meaning of historical change too.

Without a special reason early sociology renounces the experiment which – as an organ of discovering the truth – has a central position in the natural sciences. The physique sociale typically develops as a science which proceeds at once from building hypotheses to political application. From the hypothesis of the French materialists that the machine theory of Descartes can be transferred to human beings a direct political program of revolutionary reconstruction of mankind was derived. Instead of experiments, illustrative (but mostly not representative) single examples are given which date from the contemporary political historiography and from ethnological monographs. This discrepancy between a strong empirical-scientific program of knowledge and actual restrictions to the formulation and illustration of hypotheses (or speculations) has