INTRODUCTION

In an article published in 1964 David Lockwood coined two terms, system integration and social integration, which have since become central in theoretical discussions about society. This essay will explore the different meanings the terms have been given by Lockwood (1964), Jürgen Habermas (1973), Anthony Giddens (1984) and Nicos Mouzelis (1991).

This essay introduces a map that will make it possible to survey the dimensions in the discussions about system and social integration. Mapping the different concepts can be of value in itself but as the contributions from the different theorists show, metaphorically speaking, mapping has limits. A crucial question in the discussion is how the two terms, system and social integration, can be theoretically connected. It is important both to distinguish between the two terms and between the different meanings of the two terms, and to see how system and social integration – in their different meanings – can be connected to each other. Thus, the essay starts with a map of distinctions. Later, the different contributions will be placed on the map and the different conceptions will be compared. The essay ends by suggesting a synthesized and multidimensional conception of system and social integration.

The word 'integration' comes from the Latin integer, meaning whole, complete, essential. When one speaks about an integral part of something one points at something essential which keeps the rest together. Integrity means moral soundness, a kind of gyroscopic ability to keep one’s moral individuality intact even when sailing in troubled waters. Compared with these meanings, the connotations of integration are weaker when the term is used in common sociological discourse, where one often just means that something functions in an unspecified way, or satisfies all practical purposes. A search in bibliographies shows that a great deal of research has been devoted to questions about racial integration and about integration of foreigners or disabled persons into mainstream society. What interests us here, however, is the work since 1964 in general sociology that aims at giving the term integration a more precise meaning in the theory of society.

Examples of different integrative mechanisms in traditional sociological theory are: force, legitimate political power, bureaucracy, positive law, the market, democratic institutions and processes, cultural community, religion, tradition, rituals, and consensus (whether reached via freedom, persuasion or hegemonic ideology).
Another theme in discussions about integration is that it can be seen both as a state and as a process. I shall use the term ‘integrative mechanism’ to avoid distinguishing between these two meanings.

Since Herbert Spencer (1961), differentiation has been the traditional conceptual companion to integration in sociological theory. Examples of differentiation are: division of labour (Durkheim 1964); institutional differentiations in law, science, art and morals; gender, national and racial differences. Differentiation in these senses will not be dealt with in this essay in a systematic way. The logical opposite, though, of integration is not differentiation but disintegration. In the present context, then, differentiation will not be dealt with; instead the dimension of integration/disintegration will be the theme. Examples of disintegration are: functional inconsistencies, contradictions, failures, war, suppression, class struggle, interest conflict, disease, anomie, discrimination, separation and psychosocial pathologies. The theme of the present essay is integration, seen with a view to the possibility of disintegration; it is not the classical theme of differentiation and integration.

META-THEORETICAL MAPPING

Mapping the dimensions of sociological theory is difficult, because the dimensions of meta-theoretical mapping are disputed, and in many ways the discussion about system integration and social integration can be seen as disagreements about the dimensions of mapping. However, in the theoretical progress since 1964, not least through the contributions of the sociologists covered here, a theoretical awareness seems to have developed that the three most important meta-theoretical dimensions in sociological theory are: (1) macro versus micro, (2) structure versus actor, and (3) objectivist versus non-objectivist approaches.

Macro-phenomena are phenomena where the numbers of actors or individuals are too large to allow simultaneous face-to-face contact, such as in the case of societies, classes and organizations. Sometimes macro-phenomena are subdivided into a ‘meso-level’ consisting mostly of organizations and a proper macro-level consisting of ‘societies’. Micro-phenomena are phenomena where actors are in face-to-face-contact with each other, whether such contacts are permanent or sporadic. The notion of face-to-face interaction is, however, becoming increasingly unsatisfying in (post)modern societies where different media such as the telephone, telefax and international networks of e-mail make direct contacts possible without a co-presence in space. In line with a micro-, meso- and macro-distinction, Luhmann has made a well-known distinction between three types of social system analysis: the interactional systems level, the organizational systems level and the societal systems level (Luhmann 1982: 69–89). In order to delimit the complexity of the discussion, in this essay I will treat both the organizational and the societal level as examples of macro-phenomena.