The notion of causality

In his *Physics*, Aristotle (1930, 194b, 195a and b) introduced a conception of causality that exerted decisive influence on Western thought. He defined it as the ‘why’ of things, the primary cause of ‘coming into being’ and ‘passing away’ of a given phenomenon. Aristotle listed the distinct types of causality as (1) ‘that out of which a thing comes to be and persists – as the bronze of the statue, or the silver of the bowl – its material ‘substratum’; (2) that which derives from the universal ‘form’ or the ‘archetype’ of the thing, its ‘essence’, which logically pre-exists it; (3) that which consists in the ‘primary source of the change or coming to rest’ – ‘what makes of what is made and what causes change of what is changed’; and (4) that which appears as finality, implying the ‘end’ of the phenomenon under consideration, or ‘that for the sake of which a thing is done’ (when it is an ‘activity’ or ‘instrument’). The social sciences have translated in varied forms these definitions, which have also been found in later developments of Western philosophy.

That which causes movement – becoming – or permanence has been seen as ‘efficient’ causality and that which entails ‘ends’ has been read as teleological causality, often translating the *intentional* causality on the part of the – especially individual, as well as sometimes collective – agents which, in this regard, are thought of according to the model of the subjectivity of individuals. The causality which Aristotle related to matter has been seen as the action of nature upon society. And formal causality has been understood either as the action of society upon itself or as the fundamental causal elements which, by abstracting from accidents and contingencies, frequently appear associated to the same system. It is easy to point to Weber, Marx and Durkheim respectively, as
expressions of these readings, although these conceptions are combined in several ways in the most diverse writers, including those quoted above, who display complex views of social life and the causalities which are exerted in its course. The ‘meaning’ which individual actors lend to their action was crucial for Weber; for Marx, the conditioning workings of the infrastructure upon the superstructures should stand out – along with the teleological causality of labour and action; Durkheim underscored the specificity of social facts and the action of society upon itself. Weber’s ‘ideal types’ are in often articulated to fundamental causal factors – whereby he connects Protestantism and capitalism – which Marx spots, with a focus on capitalism, in England, while Durkheim deemed it possible to unearth universal causes through ‘crucial experiments’ – the ‘principle of determinism’ guaranteed that only one and the same cause corresponded to an effect.¹

However, although in Marx the social classes, qua collective agents and collectivities in general – such as industrial plants wherein co-operation is exerted – suggested a new principle of causality, this tends always to be placed in the social sciences in general under the aegis of the action of reflexive individuals, of social systems which influence their members or their parts – or of the interaction between them – or of the impact which nature, as a motionless entity, exerts upon society. Social scientists reason with the model of individual subjectivity in mind, and take society and nature according to a model which somehow compels the reduction of society to its individual members or to its definition with a reference to the idea of emergent properties. Nature, in turn, albeit by and large excessively absent from this sort of reflection, comes up as the entity which, in an explicit manner, merely suffers the action of society. It is true that its impact upon social life is deemed fundamental, for example in the work of the mature Marx and in later formulations which embraced this aspect of historical materialism. Moreover, under the sway of German Romanticism, in the young Marx, in the Frankfurt School and today in numerous ecologists, we can find an attribution to nature of subjectivity similar to the human one (see Eder, 1988). Therefore, in the best hypothesis, one attributes to nature and to social systems – qua collective actors – almost anthropomorphic characteristics; more usually, nature and social systems are perceived as utterly passive. In any event, if their influence is not overlooked, there is no notion of causality elaborated to deal with their collective impact upon external phenomenon, whether as to human collectivities or to others, of a physical–chemical and/or organic character.