Part I
Concepts and Framework

Three indicatory questions structure this section, the initial one having been analyzed in Section 1.1 ‘Theory and Concepts’: what are the main concepts we need for an advancement of the concept of society, and how might they be most usefully defined and deployed? The second question, as addressed in Section 1.2 ‘Globalization’, is: what is the best way of thinking about globalization, both in principle as well as when related to the chosen focus on society? And against this background, Section 1.3 ‘Europe’, begins to develop the discussion of the question: how is or might Europe be imagined as society?

1.1 Theory and Concepts

The reason for society’s continuous ‘pull test’ is its situatedness right at the nerve centre of human existence, where the most fundamental dynamics of generality and particularity, homogeneity and heterogeneity, the collective and the individual, come together. Discussions and academic framings of society’s genuinely challenging, inescapably mobile position – and this paradox puts it all in a nutshell – characteristically reflect just this issue. Here, instead of relying on contrastive assumptions, such as opposing collective and individual, structure and actor or harmonious integration and confrontational disintegration, a new, more theoretically integrative perspective is being developed.

Whenever the question ‘society?’ is posed a vast number of related concepts immediately come to mind. Therefore, it is imperative to make a considered selection of terms and their understandings according to the desiderata of each specifically chosen perspective. Here, instead of arguing in a strictly linear form, I suggest opening up a
conceptual discursive space on the general basis of the following terms and their dynamics: the relation between individual and collective, integration/disintegration versus inclusion/exclusion, all set against the general background of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Discussions of these terms are being provided in Section 1.1.1 ‘The General Conceptual Space’. A critical elaboration on this basis takes place on ‘Community Versus Society’ (Section 1.1.2). Section 1.1.3 ‘A Preliminary Concept of Society’ offers a first working definition of the main concept that serves as a starting point for further theoretical elaborations throughout the text. By gradually developing theory-led working definitions and hypotheses, this section aims at preparing for the subsequent parts of the book which conversely presuppose a certain set of shared understandings of the most fundamental aspects and categories.

1.1.1 The General Conceptual Space

I follow Georg Simmel’s path by assuming that the fundamental unit for analyzing society is interplay \[\text{Wechselwirkung}\] on a micro-level, thought of as a process on meso- and macro-levels, and termed sociation \[\text{Vergesellschaftung}\]. In this sense, the primary focus is on forms of exchange that happen between human beings.\(^1\)

This is already embodied in the supposition that the most general essence of the human species is its quasi natural social interdependence. This may be particularly obvious both in young and old ages and/or in highly differentiated societies, but it is a universal principle. The human being is a social being, and that fact applies to such degrees and in such a variety of expressions that limits its comparability to other animals. This reaches right down to the very foundations of human self-definition. On the basis of the understanding that “human existence, at all levels, is one vast and complex tissue of relationalities” (Gifford 2010, 14), it is immediately clear that we are looking for self-placing, usually by the means of comparison. Accordingly, Smith assumes: “Society is the

\(^1\) Please accept this quite old-fashioned simplification as being merely a starting point of the discussion. Colleagues have, of course, developed this direction much more specifically and with far-reaching effects, for instance John Urry who suggests that “[...] sociology could develop a new agenda for a discipline that is losing its central concept of human ‘society’. It is a discipline organised around networks, mobility and horizontal fluidities” (Urry 2004b/2000, 201). Other perspectives are ‘plant sociology’ (Alphonse de Candolle), ‘stellar societies’ (Alfred North Whitehead) or the general point of ‘irrelevance of the nature-society divide’ for understanding human co-existence (Gabriel Tarde) (see also Latour 2004, 451).