ABSTRACT

Purpose – The process of European integration presents an excellent opportunity for analyzing the social construction of society under modern conditions, and simultaneously for identifying a central pseudo-problem that has preoccupied sociologists, namely: how to define “society.” This attempt to link the sociology of European integration and the sociological theory of society must achieve two tasks: while the latter must explain how presupposing an unequivocal understanding of “society” is problematic, the former must provide a reference frame for evaluating empirical information about the practical use of the term, “society,” within actually existing societies.

Design/methodology/approach – Modern sociological thinking requires that we take seriously the roles and place of actors in society. As a consequence, sociology is obligated to engage in second-order observations. Sociology must observe how people observe and interpret society, and how such observations shape their actions.

Findings – Second-order observations directly influence the sociological use of the term “society”; yet sociology must not rely on a seemingly ready-made understanding of society. It is for this reason that the process
of European integration is a stroke of luck for sociology. The process of European integration irritates sociological routines and offers rich empirical data, enabling us to analyze the social construction of a society empirically.

Research limitations/implications - As a sociological concept, "society" has different meanings depending on whether it is used for first-order observations or for second-order observations.

Originality value - The dialectics between institution building and action in the Euro crisis will spur a development quickly transcending the nation-state, concretizing in practice the well-known critique of "methodological nationalism."

Keywords: European society; European Union; European integration; society; sociological theory; second-order observations; sociology of knowledge; methodological nationalism

A STROKE OF LUCK FOR SOCIOLOGY

The process of European integration provides a remarkable stimulus for the sociological theory of society, in that it represents a rapid institutional change which irritates sociological routines regarding observations of society. Thus, the process presents an excellent opportunity for analyzing the social construction of society under modern conditions, and simultaneously for identifying a central pseudo-problem that has preoccupied sociologists, namely: how to define "society." In particular, the process of European integration has taken the form of two sociologically relevant impulses.

First, it triggers reflections about the meaning of "society" in sociological usage. Evidently, with respect to European integration, the word "society" is used in common practice, either in terms of a European society in the making, or to decry absence of a society at the European level. Yet, what do such practical observations imply for the sociological theory of society?

Second, European integration entails a unique opportunity to formulate new questions concerning causes and consequences of the construction of society with explanatory intent, in the context of the sociological theory of society. Specifically, it is the high speed of social change and the apparent tensions between institutional change and the lag in social integration that turns the process of integration at the European level into a laboratory of society building. How, then, is European integration a stroke of luck for sociology?

To answer this question, my attempt to link the sociology of European integration and the sociological theory of society must achieve two tasks. First, the sociological theory of society has to explain why it must refrain from presupposing an unequivocal understanding of "society." And second, the sociology of European integration must provide a reference frame for stressing the importance of, and for evaluating, empirical information about the practical use of "society" within actually existing societies.

In order to confront these two tasks effectively, it is key to approach the challenge in a reflexive manner; that is to say, by considering the modern conditions of sociological thought sociologically. I proceed as follows. After briefly describing my understanding of "modern thinking," I will endeavor to explicate modern conditions of recognition and to delineate the specifically modern meaning of "explanation." The resulting guidelines for a sociological theory of society that focuses on second-order observations will set the stage to demarcate prerequisites for the sociological use of the concept, society - in the process providing a sample of empirical evidence regarding how people tend to locate society between the levels of nation-state and Europe. Finally, I will conclude with a short sketch of what it means to apply "second-order observations" to the question of an emerging European society.

SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE: SOME BASICS

"The elders" proceeded with their thoughts up to a point which they recognized as "one clear terminus" (Wittgenstein, 1933, p. 181). Based on the basics of the sociology of knowledge, it is relatively easy to reach the following consensus: under modern conditions of recognition, explanations cannot refer to an absolute reference point. This is the result of disenchantment - the Entzauberung der Welt (Max Weber), initiated by the simultaneously occurring natural-technical revolution, the bourgeois-political revolution, and the capitalist-economic revolution. With respect to the logical structure of thought, the result of disenchantment is that it is no longer possible to understand all existing phenomena as emanations of an absolute and almighty origin, in a manner that would allow answering all questions of meaning with reference to an Absolute Beginning.
The assumption of such an absolute origin provided the premodern logic with a virtually unlimited explanatory power. As Günter Dux (2011, p. 142) put it, "The absolute of the priority of the mind or spirit in premodern thought was absolute in that it contained a substance that brought force from itself what existed and happened in the world. The mode of explanation consisted in retring the explanandum back to it, in order to have it then be brought forth out of it." It is the presumption of the obviousness of the absolute reference point that causes the explanatory power of the premodern logics. In its context, referring to the absolute appeared to answer all questions because the absolute is beyond doubt, because it is absolutely beyond all questions. The opposite side of the coin is obvious: the premodern logic loses its explanatory power as soon as the presumption of the absolute reference point itself becomes an object of questions. "In a world that has become radically secular, in which, as we have said, nothing is found that escapes a context of conditions, it must also be possible to gain understanding of the constructed world by taking into account the conditions under which they were able to develop, and this includes the different kinds of logic upon which they are based" (Dux, 2011, p. 135). The crucial point is not that one or another explanation is no longer convincing. We are not confronted with a mere change in semantics, but with a structural change of the logic of thought itself. A soon as the absolute reference point itself becomes an object of questions, the explanatory power of the premodern logic has been lost, because every further attempt to refer to it leads to an infinite recourse (see also von Foerster, 2008, p. 29). In a manner of speaking, explaining the world's stability by referring to its foundation on the back of a tortoise is convincing only as long as the conditions of the stable standing position of the tortoise is immune to being questioned. Otherwise - to stay with the metaphor - such an explanation would result in an endless tower of tortoises.

Bringing the virtually unlimited explanatory power of the absolutist premodern logic to mind, the fundamental necessity to reorient (scientific) thought becomes clear. As a consequence, all related explanations become unconvincing, where the explanandum already contains the explanans. Examples are the explanation of a social fact by referring to an actor's will representing it, or the explanation of a social phenomenon by an a priori assumed feature of society.

What are the implications of the above for formulating a concept of society that is to be useful for sociological research? My central thesis is that "society" as a concept that sociology is responsible for has a different meaning depending on whether it is used for first-order or second-order observations (see Vobruba, 2009).

**SOCIETY: TWO PERSPECTIVES**

The perspective of first-order observations is what I will refer to as "people’s perspective." By using the term "people" I do not refer to a social stratum, but rather to a particular perspective on social practices. People – that is, everybody – observe social conditions, interpret them, and act according to their interpretations. In the perspective of second-order observations, the people's observations in turn are being observed. To be sure, this is the starting point of sociology – by observing people's observations. "Everyone, to become a social scientist, must make up his mind to put somebody else instead of himself as the center of this world, namely, the observed person" (Schütz, 1943, p. 143; Soeffner, 1989, 25ff). This is the crucial difference between first-order and second-order observations: on the basis of their first-order observations and interpretations, people must cope with reality, whereas second-order observations are relieved from practice. "As scientific observers of the social world, we are not practically but only cognitively interested in it" (Schütz, 1943, p. 134). But this by no means implies that sociologists can construct social reality just as they like. How so?

In order to act with intentionality, people are obliged to attain realistic interpretations of reality. This obligation to realism, which dominates people's observations, limits the spectrum of their interpretations and actions. "What is the consequence for a sociological definition of 'society'?" Every definition that does not renounce its replicability has to refer to the people's practical knowledge and actions which reveal their notion of 'society'" (Balog, 1999, p. 70, my translation). Precisely because society exists even without being observed by sociologists (Simmel, 1992, p. 43), sociological observations are obligated to take into account the restrictions under which people observe social circumstances, interpret them, and which act upon. This backing protects sociology against arbitrary constructions, for the simple reason that people's interpretations of social reality are all but arbitrary – for if one wants to avoid negative consequences of an action, one needs to conform to given social conditions in society to a high degree. By observing people's observations, interpretations and actions, sociology has the ability to link up with social reality in a manner that avoids the danger to perish in arbitrariness (as is the fate of so-called radical constructivism). "The solid ground that enables sociology to
construct its concepts, which gives certainty that social phenomena do exist to begin with – in the process disciplining sociological thought – is everyday knowledge” (Balog, 1999, p. 77, my translation). It is the realism of people that grounds sociology.

Standard sociological research is about observing what and how people observe society, and how they act accordingly (see Vobruba, 2009). But sociology also can become an object of second-order observation, for in the perspective of the latter, there is an exceedingly high degree of flexibility. Thus, sociology appears as a certain practice of researching “people.” In the process, it is possible to observe how sociologists observe, interpret and act (according to specific methodological rules). This competence to self-observe engenders sociology’s reflexivity and constitutes the core of its disciplinary identity (Peters, 1993, 390ff; Vobruba, 2012).

It might cause certain difficulties to envisage the implications of these considerations, for sociology appears twice: first, in the perspective of second-order observation, where sociology observes and interprets social practices. And second, in the perspective of first-order observations where sociology appears as a certain practice. What does this mean for the sociological use of the term “society”?

In the perspective of first-order observation, hence for the purpose of practical research, the term society must be well suited for the purpose of delineating the perimeter of research, thus providing a particular heuristic understanding of the sociological theory of society. In this sense, society is useful as an instrument facilitating the practice of research. Thus, any concept of society neither can be “true” or “false,” but either useful or not useful. Such concepts fulfill a heuristic function and unavoidably entail a plurality of meanings. Virtually every single sociological actor might conceptualize “society,” claiming validity for its particular meaning in practical research. But one has to take into account – and every sociological actor has to do so – that other actors advocate alternative concepts of society. The very fact, empirically speaking, that there is a plurality of sociological concepts of society, reveals the impossibility to find the “true” concept by means of theory – think of risk society, multi-options society, full employment society, knowledge society, etc. Taking a “European Society” for granted, for instance, is especially far from being unproblematic, as it impedes the pursuit of fruitful empirical questions.

All claims for the validity of a particular concept of society must take their own inescapable plurality into account. This rule, which sociology as a social practice imposes on itself, results from the conditions of recognition within modernity and sociology’s reflexivity. To start out with a definite substantial concept of society would be a relapse of sociology into the absolutist logic of premodern thought. Sociological explanations would end up tracing back explananda to an absolute explanans – hence, to a notion of society a priori equipped with creation capacity. Thus, explanation would mean nothing more than projecting a social phenomenon into a notion of society, and deducing the phenomenon from this notion. This is precisely the premodern way of “explanation” by alluding to an absolute point of reference, which became obsolete in modernity.

In the perspective of second-order observations, the heuristic term, “society,” is used in order to grasp phenomena which might in practice be observed and interpreted as society. In other words: the sociological theory of society refers to the practical understanding of society as an empirical fact.

It seems to be likely that the process of European integration presents a unique opportunity to observe empirically the process of construction of a society. European integration is a superb example insofar as over the course of its development, both the territorial notion and the institutional structure change at high speed, thus providing evidence of society as an ongoing process of construction. The specific features of the process of European integration allow for experiences that are without comparison to any premodern notion of society. In this sense, European integration indeed can be appreciated as a manifestation of continually evolving modernity (Müller, 2010). It is here that we are confronted with the starting point for research questions such as: Who participates in constructing society in the course of European integration? What do the different constructions of society look like? What are the reasons for related differences?

By observing how the term society is understood practically and used, the sociological theory of society changes from prescriptive definitions of society to its empirical observation and analysis. It is a transformation analogous to the shift from critical theory to a sociology of critique (Vobruba, 2009), or from religious sociology to the sociology of religion. Such changes are contingent on the willingness to observe the strict distinction between people’s observations and the sociological observation of these observations. At the same time, the sociological theory of society is far too abstract to be directly translated into empirical research. Yet second-order observation, as I endeavor to conceive of it, is directly linked to empirical data.

In the effort to further clarify this matter, I will next provide a sketch of different – and rivaling – understandings of society that have been proposed during the course of the process of European integration. To do so, we must distinguish two dimensions. First, understandings of “society” vary in the dimension of inclusion and exclusion: space and borders are
of crucial importance. And second, understandings of “society” vary in the
dimension of consent and conflict. To begin with, the first dimension might be
conceived of as the “who-dimension,” the second as the “how-dimension.”
Practical considerations concerning the “who-dimension” concentrate on
the spatial extension of society, on its borders and their permeability. The
two main rival concepts are the nation-state as society and Europe.

“EUROPE”

Analyzing the construction of a European society by applying the approach
of the sociological theory of society, we require a preliminary idea of the
meaning of “Europe.” As Morin (1991, p. 33, my translation) put it.
“Europe is a vague term.” “Europe (...) probably [is] Semitic in origin and a
distant relative of the Arabic ‘Maghreb’” (Brague, 2001, p. 127). Initially,
Phoenicians used it in order to mark a direction: toward the west. During
the entire antiquity the meaning of the term remained amorphous. Within
advanced antique civilization the term described “something amorphous in
the North” (Morin, 1991, p. 35, my translation). Corresponding to the
minor importance of these territories, the term itself remained unimportant.
Its rise started not until the Middle Ages, in order to mark the difference
from the Islamic world, though the term “Christendom” was more common
than “Europe” (Cobet, 2010; Jordan, 2002; Kintzinger, 2010).

From its beginning, the unfolding of the modern world of nation-states
was accompanied by initial attempts to conceptualize Europe as a political
and territorial entity. Europe was imagined as an ideal peaceful place in
sharp contrast to the belligerent reality of which the European territory was
suffering, in particular during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1638). “The
dissemination of the term ‘Europe’, displacing “Christianity’, occurred
exactly when nation-states gained full sovereignty” (Morin 1991, p. 50, my
translation).

In the 19th century, the completion of “Europe” as a definite territorial-
political designation took place. Most projects of European unification were
conceived as encompassing projects of promoting peace; hence they were
reactions to territorial conflicts. Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi’s writings on
“Pan-Europa” (1923) were of particular importance. He saw the unification
of Europe as the only option for preventing Europe’s decline into global
insignificance, and as only alternative to a second world-wide war. The latter
turned from a threat into a reality. Subsequently, the scope and quality of
the idea of a united Europe changed. On the one hand, shortly after 1945.

“Europe” became occupied along the lines of the East-West divide;
subsequently, the term was applied only to the territory west of the “Iron
curtain.” On the other hand, with the start of the process of European
integration, first attempts at political institutionalization began to take place.

All in all, the territorial connotation of the term “Europe” has a long
tradition. But its scope was (and remains) unclear, and its meaning exceeded
the territorial connotation by tradition, also implying certain social and
cultural qualities. By contrast, the political-institutional charge of the term
is a very new achievement. It began with the European Coal and Steel
Community established in Paris in 1951, and the Treaties of Rome,
establishing the European Economic Community and the European Atomic
Energy Community in 1957 (Dinan, 2005, p. 3).

Europe continues to imply territorial connotations, which in the course of
the process of European integration turned into a politico-economic space
characterized by new scope and qualities. In a world of nation-states, the
development of the European Union toward a postnational political space
(Vobruba, 2012) unavoidably spurs tensions. Europe and the nation-state
both describe territorial frames for institution building and practical
observations and interpretations of society. Both concepts function as
competing frames for the development of collective identities, hence
competing expectations, interests and solidarities. Thus the tensions between
Europe and the nation-state became manifest as competing observations
and interpretations which guide people’s actions within what they perceive
as “society.”

By stressing this, we have paved the way to link the sociological theory
of society with the people’s practical observations in the course of European
integration. For the purpose of the following sketch, I distinguish between
three categories of groups of relevant actors – integration elite, national
elites, and the people.

THE ACTOR’S PERSPECTIVE

The emergence of European integration elites at the same time is due to
the development of European institutions, and the result of their effort to propel
the process. Until the early 1950s, the idea of a united Europe was an
“intellectual castle in the air” (Brunn, 2002, p. 21, my translation). After
World War II, Europe-minded intellectuals joined forces with Europe-
oriented parts of national political elites. This constellation led to the first
steps of institutionalization. Later on, as the impassioned commitment
for Europe began to subside, European integration became a matter of professional diplomacy and politics. As the other side of the coin, promoting European integration provided a sociotope for the development of a professionalized European integration elite, which has identified with the aims of European integration (Münch, 2008).

In light of this historical constellation, it becomes clear that “progressive Europeanism” (Trenz, 2005) is linked to a particular group, namely the European integration elite. Given the belligerent European past, they perceive European integration as without alternative, and as an all including positive-sum game (Vobruba, 2007). The most important consequence deriving from this is that integration elites perceive European integration to be in the interest of all; thus, opposition to integration is regarded as simply irrational. As former EU Vice-President Günter Verheugen put it on the occasion of eastward enlargement: “There are no losers of enlargement at all” (Verheugen, 2004, p. 8, my translation).

The national political elites represent a more ambivalent stance regarding European integration. On the one hand, they are involved in the EU’s institutions, as they form the European Council, which is responsible for most decisions of relevance, at the European level. But on the other hand, they also compete with the European integration elites for influence, competences and responsibilities, as they tend to perceive the European Commissions’ regulation and the European Courts’ decisions as restrictions of national sovereignty. Consequently, the national political elites address European matters inconsistently. As participants in EU treaties, they promote European integration, but at the same time, they are bound by their national electorates. As a consequence, national political elites strive to secure their legitimation in the national political frame, hence defending national competencies against and laying blame for unpopular decision on “Brussels.” Notwithstanding such tensions, different national elites perceive the rivalry between the national and the European level differently, depending on whether or not a nation takes part in a particular integration project, like the treaty of Schengen (abolishing EU-internal border control), the common currency, free movement of labor force, etc. Particularly as a consequence of the Euro crisis that began with the increasing spread of bond-yields between different member states in the Euro-zone in 2009 (Preunkert & Vobruba, 2012; Vobruba, 2012), the less competitive and highly indebted Euro-members perceive the austerity programs imposed on them in return for continuing financial support, as a “dictate” from the European Union in general, and from several individual members in particular (especially Germany).

In such conflicts, competing conceptions of the territorial framing of society became manifest. European integration elites claim that in a rapidly globalizing world the European framing of society is the only approach that promises more effective politics. By contrast, national political elites construct society in a national frame, in order (to pretend) to advocate people’s interests, and to secure effective politics, thus trying to prolong the political tradition of the nation-state, along with a traditional understanding of sovereignty (Vobruba, 2012).

At bottom, there are two ways of observing the perspective of the citizens toward European integration sociologically. The first is to engage in empirical research on attitudes toward European integration, and the second is to reconstruct politically relevant manifestations of interests concerning European integration.

Some available empirical evidence suggests the formation of a European society, though in the modest sense that “mutual relevance is high and of a cohesive nature” (Delhey, 2004, p. 16). Empirical data on reciprocal relations between nations show an increase of trust between the populations of the EU’s 15 member states before expansion in 2004. At the same time, there are indications of a clear preference for Nordic members, for small member states, and for neighboring member states, and clear differences between Western (old) and Eastern (new) member states.

Similar patterns are apparent in data on nation-specific values and attitudes. In principle, citizens tend to support the value of equality, but in the face of scarcity of jobs, they tend to charge the nation-state with the responsibility to protect the national labor force – though this attitude varies across the population. And it should not come as a surprise that in the affluent core countries of the European Union less qualified people, exposed to competing cheap foreign labor, tend toward a national framing of society (Gerhards, 2006, p. 260ff). It is for this reason that after eastward enlargement in 2004, Germany and Austria postponed the free movement of workers for as long as legally possible, i.e., until May 1, 2011 (Nissen, 2009).

How do people observe and interpret the central issue of inequality? The EU modifies interpersonal as well as interterritorial inequalities; at least at the time of its eastward enlargement in 2004, the European Union incorporated vast welfare gaps. The dynamics they cause depend on people’s interpretations affected by structural inequalities and the manner people perceive them (Vobruba, 1998). Interpreting inequality implies comparisons, as well as necessarily a territorial frame. Do individuals locate themselves in a structure of inequality within the national or a European frame? Empirical evidence suggests that there is a tendency for individuals to compare
themselves with reference groups "up-hill" (Delhey & Kohler, 2006); they relate their own living condition to those in richer countries, but they turn to their nation-state for remedies. Such inconsistent attributions produce the paradoxical consequence that nation-states must cope with aspirations stemming from a consciousness of inequality frame at the EU-level. In contrast to the Europeanization of several political fields, social policy has continued to remain a domain of the nation-state. Would people support a transfer of social policy-related responsibility from the national to the European level? Empirical data concerning this question clearly points toward a predominantly utilitarian attitude toward the European Union (Nissens, 2006, p. 163ff), limiting the prospect of social policy becoming Europeanized. Two sets of variables have to be taken into account: variables regarding the welfare states, and variables regarding personal features. First, generous welfare states (e.g., in Scandinavia) spur much less willingness to agree to transferring of social policy competencies to the European level than weak welfare states (as in Southern Europe). Universalistic welfare states with a high impact of redistribution lead to less agreement than wage labor-centered welfare states with close connections between individual contributions and transfers. Second, qualified people with high incomes tend to support the idea of transferring social policy to the European level, unqualified low income people insist in the national welfare state (Maun, 2005; Wilke, 2011).

All in all these results reveal that citizens construct society according to their own economic interests. Just as these interests vary, so do corresponding constructions of "society." The emergence of a European society means a wider institutional frame for social conflict in general, and for competition in particular, especially via an enlarged labor market. People tend to accept a European-framed society if they expect to be able to take advantage of it, and they oppose Europeanization of society if they expect to lose. "Europe is a matter of the leading elites, the nation-state a matter of endangered, marginalized people" (Münch, 2001, p. 294, my translation).

If people have in mind anything that resembles what would be a European society, they are far from basing it on consent and homogeneity. People construct European society as an arena for conflicts and as gradually integrated.

"SOCIETY" WITHIN EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

"The sociology of knowledge must concern itself with everything that passes for 'knowledge' in society" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 14-15). It took a long time for the sociology of knowledge to open itself up to all kinds of knowledge. Though Karl Mannheim, one of the main founders of this subdiscipline, occasionally referred to the knowledge of a farmers' son (Mannheim, 1985, p. 241), he dealt almost exclusively with systems of scientific and ideological thought as the subjects of his sociology of knowledge. Thus, sociology of knowledge began as a sort of self-observation closely related to epistemology and (German) philosophy – a fact that hampered the reception of this approach in the United States for a long time. But as Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 15) stress, "[t]heoretical thoughts, 'ideas', Weltanschauungen are not that important in society. (...) [O]nly few are concerned with the theoretical interpretation of the world, but everybody lives in a world of some sort. Not only is the focus on theoretical thought unduly restrictive for the sociology of knowledge, it is also unsatisfactory because even this part of socially available 'knowledge' cannot be fully understood if it is not placed in the framework of a more general analysis of 'knowledge'." It is a legacy of this constellation that until the present day sociology of knowledge predominantly reserves attempts of a systematic understanding of society for (social-) scientific knowledge, while associating everyday knowledge with consideration about incidental matters. But such a restriction is not convincing, as social scientific considerations are bound to seep into everyday knowledge, and sociological descriptions of society pervade society (Luhmann, 1997). Specifically, the disorientation and the need for reorientation caused by rapid social change and crises involve people into conflicts about an adequate understanding of the "totality" of society (Vöbruba, 1991, p. 90ff).

The current Euro crisis has triggered widespread and severe concerns about the future of a European society. The public is not just worried about further integration of the European Union, but there is also the fear that even modest discernible beginnings of a European society may be about to disintegrate (The Economist, May 26, 2012, p. 11, http://www.economist.com/node/21555916). But this danger appears as unavoidable only if one can only imagine social integration of society by consent. Fortunately, as already a short glance into sociological conflict theory reveals, this precondition is all but plausible. As a normal case, modern society is integrated by conflict (Simmel, 1992, p. 284ff; Durkheim, 1988, p. 422ff). Observing oneself as a member of society doesn't mean agreeing with all other members, but only to accept the society's institutions as the common frame for cooperation and conflict.

"Institution building precedes the formation of awareness" (Lepsius, 1999, p. 206, my translation; cf. Bach, 2006). Elite-driven European integration in
general and the invention of the Euro in particular are cases in point. The common currency provides an institutionalized politico-economic space entailing new transnational economic and social relations triggering repercussions concerning people’s economic and social behavior (Bach, 2008, 30ff). The Euro crisis set off a new dynamic of people’s action and institution building. On the one hand, as these relations become manifest both as conflicts and mutual dependencies, the Euro crisis forces people to reinterpret social circumstances and to formulate and pursue their interests accordingly. On the other hand, as the Euro crisis will continue to unfold, it is likely to become apparent that it will spur an unprecedented push of further institution building causing new regulations of financial markets (Mayntz, 2012), severe financial restrictions on governments, and new ways of transnational redistribution. These institutional developments again will form new profiles of interests, cleavages and alliances. The dialectics between institution building and action in the Euro crisis will spur a development quickly transcending the nation-state, concretizing in practice the well-known critique of “methodological nationalism.” Thus, far from causing the end of the European society, the Euro crisis is a strong indicator for a society in the making — even though it will not yield results equally acceptable to all.

Putting forth a ready-made sociological understanding of society blocks questions like these about developments between the nation-state and Europe. People champion competing understandings of society according to their different positions and interests within society. Sociology cannot adequately address the question of the future of a European society except by observing people’s observations and interpretations of European institution building and action. In order to repeat the point once more: Sociology as second-order observation is about observing people’s observations and interpretations of European institution building and action. Consequently, different interpretations of society, as they are employed in practical use, can become a subject of sociological research.

With respect to future prospects of a European society, crucial questions remain: Which groups of actors promote which territorial-institutional frame of society? What are the intentions to promote certain understandings of society based upon? How do these understandings interact? Without being in the position to answer these question at the present time, there can be no doubt that the social construction of a European society will emerge in the interaction between institutional developments and competing interpretations of society — in the course of the process of European integration.

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Many thanks to Harry F. Dahms who brought the text to a level of English I will never reach. I nevertheless insist that remaining mistakes are my responsibility.

NOTES

1. Wittgenstein (1933, p. 189) makes an attempt to substitute the premodern limits to questions by imposing his famous rule: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” But under the condition of modernity this is a hopeless endeavour. Questioning cannot be stopped and all answers cause further questions.

2. “People” is used here as the translation of the German term, “Leute.” Leute is a frequently and informally used term for “people” in general. It is never used in the singular (if it were to be used in the singular, it would be to a person). In everyday use, Leute often functions as a synonym for human beings (as in: Menschen/Leute bei der Arbeit — human beings/people at work). Importantly, Leute is not synonymous with Volk; it is never used in the same sense as the American people or the German people.

3. This is the differentia specifica between sociology and other scientific disciplines. There is no medicine of medicine; no economics of economics; no mathematics of mathematics. But certainly there is a sociology of medicine, an economic sociology, a sociology of natural-scientific knowledge (Vogel & Dux, 2010) and after all: a sociology of sociology in the sense of a sociology of sociological thought. Sociology, as far as I can see, is the only science which appears as a part of its own subject.

4. This is the reason why after 1989, Middle and Eastern European reform countries saw the fall of the Iron Curtain as their return to Europe and Eastern Enlargement as a “compensation for Yalta” (Stawarska, 1999).

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THEORIZING MODERN SOCIETY AS A DYNAMIC PROCESS

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