Summary

The theoretical development of sociology leaves much to be desired. This is not only the case in those fields that, as everyone concerned agrees, would profit from having more adequate theories to draw on. In this book a number of sociological principles and methodological points of view are formulated which enable us to formulate a number of issues as 'internal-scientific' problems; these issues, which are usually dealt with pre-scientifically as inquirer's choices and preferences, and which e.g. are presented as 'methodological dilemmas', can be reformulated as problems for which solutions can be looked for by constructing theories and empirical inquiry.

The first chapter points out that it is certainly not self-evident how the object of a science should be described. We cannot e.g. accept as a matter of course that colloquial language will be suitable. However, there is not much point in formulating 'definitions' either. It is a theory which should hand us the means by which we can characterize the object of inquiry.

Two models are discussed concerning sociology. The first is the logical-empirical one. Where it deteriorates in behaviourism, it can be formally proved to fall short of its purpose: for the description of behaviour in general theoretical terms are required, which refer to the way in which the behaviour is constituted. If that is accepted, however, the problem of theoretical terms arises for the logical-empiricist. The second model is a hermeneutic one. It is pointed out how various arguments which are brought to the fore by exponents of this model run parallel with criticism from modern philosophy of science on logical-empiricism.

Traditionally, the central problem of sociology is that of social order. Pre-scientifically it can be introduced by referring to experiences of 'die ärgerliche Tatsache der Gesellschaft' (Dahrendorf). The second chapter discusses how it is reconstructed internal-scientifically in Berger and Luckmann's 'The Social Construction of Reality'.

Berger and Luckmann distinguish 'society as subjective reality' and 'society as objective reality' and they suppose that these levels are produced by a dialectical process.

On the basis of Schütz's work the difficulties in describing the first level
are dealt with. One of Schütz’s central methodological criteria, the so-called ‘postulate of adequacy’, turns out to be undecidable, unless it is previously assumed that the actors have rules at their disposal which organize their experiences and behaviour. These rules cannot be considered a priori to be introspectively available. They are shared socially.

Difficulties in describing ‘society as objective reality’ are discussed with a view to Durkheim’s work. There too, it is shown that, in order to escape methodological problems, the assumption that the actor’s behaviour is rule-governed is necessary.

The internal-scientific reconstruction of the problem of social order which Berger and Luckmann have given, then proves to be unsatisfactory. They have failed to indicate the framework in which the dialectical process they refer to, or its products, can be examined in an empirical-scientific manner.

In the third chapter attention is paid in the first place to the concepts of ‘rule’ and ‘rule-governed behaviour’. Searle’s arguments, observations as to the role of ‘social meanings’ or ‘actor-intuitions’ and a reconstruction of the development of Wittgenstein’s philosophy lead up to the conclusion that anyone who wishes to describe social facts in an internal-scientific way, will have to draw attention to the rules that constitute these facts. ‘Rule-governed behaviour’ is sociated behaviour, behaviour relative to which actors share intuitions as to the way in which it can be or should be continued.

Next, it is argued with a view to Elias’ work, that rules express dependencies of actors which are members of a figuration, a network of actors whose rule-governed behaviour is mutually interwoven. Thus a new internal-scientific formulation of the problem of social order can be formulated: the problem is first to describe which rules are followed by the actors participating in a certain figuration, and secondly to explain why actors follow these rather than different rules.

The sociological principles formulated in chapter 3 are developed in the next chapter as to their methodological side. To start with, a reconstruction of scientific theories is given in which so-called ‘descriptive theories’ are not regarded as sets of statements, but as a ‘structure-predicate’ and a set of ‘intended applications’. A theory of this kind enables us to produce descriptions of new applications, to express our conjectures as to the structure of phenomena. Such a theory can be interpreted realistically: it establishes how facts are effected and stipulates possibilities.

It will now be possible to describe figurations by a theory which expresses the rules which actors follow within those figurations.

With descriptive theories of this kind the first level of a sociological theory has been defined. The second level consists of explanations, according to the traditional hypothetical-deductive model, although the explanandum in this case does not consist of a description of some phenomenon or other, but of a descriptive theory, which characterizes a ‘social order’.
By characterizing actors as those who follow certain rules, the question can be answered who belong within a certain figuration. It also proves possible to reconstruct the dynamical, process-like character of these figurations.

A theory which characterizes actors will also enable us to formulate the traditional 'methodological dilemma' of individualism versus collectivism as an empirical problem. The role of the concept of freedom within a sociological theory can also be discussed in this way: it is possible to reformulate a number of themes which are traditionally associated with the concept of freedom in terms of rules and figurations. This makes them suitable for empirical inquiry.

In this fourth chapter the subject of the actors-interpretations is also dealt with. This subject, too, it proves possible to formulate as an internal-scientific problem, as a question for which an answer may be found by theory-formation and empirical inquiry.

Finally, various aspects of theory-formation in sociology are illustrated by an example, dealing with inquiries into political power.