

P R E F A C E

Alberto L'Abate has written an important book. For the readers it is also of importance to understand why exactly he has written exactly this book: because he combines the insight and knowledge of the academic social scientist with the insight and knowledge of the practitioner. From his experience in social work and social reconstruction, as an active participant in the peace movement and for nonviolence, as a social worker also in the field of mental disorders, he has a range of experience broader than most people who are only practitioners. And as an academic, a university man, he has read more than most of both the European and the US literature in the field, and is in a position to bring to the empiricism of the latter the philosophical depth of the former.

The problem which Abate invites the reader to explore with him is nothing less than how we should conceive of human nature, the nature of society and the nature of the relation between the two. Two models emerge from the study of the literature: society as essentially consensual and functional, and society as essentially conflictual. Correspondingly there are two basic views of human beings, as essentially harmonious and essentially conflict loaded. The basic point made by L'Abate is that this is all too simplistic. Neither view fits reality as he knows it, as practitioner. Both views carry important, but only partial insights; they are both neither right nor wrong but fundamentally incomplete. Hence the search for some kind of synthesis. But he rejects cheap, simplistic eclecticism. L'Abate develops a perspective or paradigm within which these two perspectives or paradigms emerge as special cases. Or, put differently: if we refer to the two perspectives, often identified in our generation with such names as Parsons and Dahrendorf as theories, then L'Abate is working in the garden of metatheories. Actually, he is even at a level above, having as his units of critical analysis not only theories but other metatheories.

His own proposal is a view of society as a system in unstable equilibrium, a more complex position encompassing consensus (equilibrium) and conflict (instability), thus giving some role for both perspectives. In doing so he has to make use of more complex paradigms than found in classical science -- as pointed out by many contemporary authors, among them Edgar Morin. I could add, however, at this point, that if one moves outside the Occident to the types of discourses found in Buddhism and Daoism, then much of this becomes considerably less problematic, as this double nature of human beings and society is taken for granted from the very beginning. The Contradiction is not in the views of human and social nature but in human and social nature themselves; moreover, contradictions are real, not something to wish away or do away with. They will always be with us, but they will also always change.

I recommend this book, both as a guide to the problem and the

debate and the literature, and because it opens for new perspectives developed by the author as a citizen of two worlds, that of theory and that of practice. Whether we agree or not at the end of the journey is another matter. I think the reader will share with me the gratitude to the author for having been taken on a fascinating journey which also bears the stamp of being a highly personal intellectual odyssey.

Johan Galtung
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Princeton University