Chapter 1

Sociological perspectives

Introduction

'Human beings learn their behaviour and use their intelligence whereas animals simply act on instinct.' Like most commonsense notions, this idea has an element of truth, but reality is far more complex.

The regimented society of social insects such as ants and bees is an object lesson in order and organization. Every member has clearly defined tasks in a cooperative enterprise. Thus in a beehive the worker bees, depending on their age, will either feed the young, stand guard and repel strangers, forage for food, or ventilate the hive by beating their wings. The behaviour of insects is largely 'instinctive', it is based on programmes contained in the genes which direct their actions. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the behaviour of insects is based *solely* on instinct. Experiments have indicated that at least some have the ability to learn. For example, ants are able to memorize the path through a maze and are capable of applying this learning to other mazes.

Moving on from insects to reptiles, and on again to mammals, the importance of learned, as opposed to genetically determined, behaviour gradually increases. Studies of macaque monkeys on islands in northern Japan provide some indication of the importance of learned behaviour. On one island the macaques were living in the forested interior. Japanese scientists attempted to discover whether they could change the behaviour patterns of the troupe. They began by dumping potatoes in a clearing in the forest. Gradually the macaques changed their eating habits until they became largely dependent on potatoes – a food previously unknown to them – as their staple diet. The scientists slowly moved the food dumps towards the shoreline and the troupe followed. The potatoes were then regularly placed on the beach, which now became the normal habitat for the macaques.

In the following months, without any encouragement from the scientists, a number of new behaviour patterns emerged in the troupe. First, some members began washing the potatoes in the sea before eating them. Others followed suit until it became standard practice in the group. Then some of the younger macaques began paddling in the sea and eventually took the plunge and learned how to swim. They were imitated by their elders and, again, the novel behaviour of the few became the accepted behaviour of the group. Finally, some adventurous youngsters began diving off low rocky outcroppings on the shoreline, a practice which was copied by other members of the troupe.

The Japanese macaques had learned new behaviour patterns and these patterns were shared by members of the group. The simple generalization that animal behaviour is genetically determined whereas the behaviour of humans is learned is clearly incorrect. However, the range and complexity of learned behaviour in humans are far greater than in any other species. This is shown by experiments with humanity's nearest living relative, the chimpanzee. When chimpanzees are raised in human households, for the first few years they learn at the same rate as human infants of the same age, but they soon reach the limit of their ability and are rapidly overtaken by human youngsters. Compared to mammals other than humans, chimpanzees have a considerable learning capacity. They can solve simple problems in order to obtain food, they can learn a basic sign language to communicate with humans, and they can even ape their more intelligent cousins in the famous chimpanzee tea party. Yet, despite this capacity to learn, the behavioural repertoire of chimpanzees is rudimentary and limited compared to the behaviour of people.

More than any other species, humans rely for their survival on behaviour patterns that are learned. Humans have no instincts, that is they have no genetically programmed directives to behave in particular ways. An instinct involves not only the impulse to do something, but also specific instructions on how to do it. Birds have an instinct to build nests. They have an impulse for nest building and all members of a particular species are programmed to build nests in the same way.

If we look at the range and variety of dwellings constructed by humans we can see that there are no

directives based on instinct. The following examples from nineteenth-century North America provide an illustration. In the Arctic, the Eskimos constructed igloos from rectangular blocks cut from closely compacted snow. On the north-west coast of the USA and the west coast of Canada, tribes such as the Nootka built oblong houses with a framework of cedar logs, walled and roofed with planks. On the opposite side of the subcontinent, in the eastern woodlands, the Iroquois also lived in oblong dwellings, known as 'long houses', but they substituted birch bark for planks. On the prairies, the easily transportable conical tipi made from long saplings covered in buffalo hides provided shelter for tribes such as the Sioux and Cheyenne. Further south, the Apache of Arizona and New Mexico lived in domed wickiups made from brushwood and scrub. In the same area, tribes such as the Zuñi and the Hopi built the first apartment houses in the USA. Even today many members of these tribes live in multi-occupation dwellings made from sun-dried mud bricks known as adobe. These examples show clearly that the human genetic code does not contain specific instructions to behave in a particular way – at least as far as housebuilding is concerned.

Culture and society

To all intents and purposes a newborn human baby is helpless. Not only is it physically dependent on older members of the species but it also lacks the behaviour patterns necessary for living in human society. It relies primarily on certain biological drives, such as hunger, and on the charity of its elders to satisfy those drives. The infant has a lot to learn. In order to survive, it must learn the skills, knowledge and accepted ways of behaving of the society into which it is born. It must learn a way of life; in sociological terminology, it must learn the culture of its society.

Ralph Linton states that 'The culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation.' In Clyde Kluckhohn's elegant phrase, culture is a 'design for living' held by members of a particular society. Since humans have no instincts to direct their actions, their behaviour must be based on guidelines that are learned. In order for a society to operate effectively, these guidelines must be shared by its members. Without a shared culture, members of society would be unable to communicate and cooperate, and confusion and disorder would result. Culture therefore has two essential qualities: first, it is learned, second, it is shared. Without it there would be no human society.

Culture and behaviour

To a large degree culture determines how members of society think and feel: it directs their actions and defines their outlook on life. Members of society usually take their culture for granted. It has become so much a part of them that they are often unaware of its existence. The following example given by Edward T. Hall (1973) provides an illustration. Two individuals, one from North America, the other from South America, are conversing in a hall 40 feet long. They begin at one end of the hall and finish at the other end, the North American steadily retreating, the South American relentlessly advancing. Each is trying to establish the 'accustomed conversation distance' defined by their own culture. To the North American, the South American comes too close for comfort, whereas the South American feels uneasy conversing at the distance the North American demands. Often it takes meetings such as this to reveal the pervasive nature of culturally determined behaviour.

Culture defines accepted ways of behaving for members of a particular society. Such definitions vary from society to society. This can lead to considerable misunderstanding between members of different societies, as the following example provided by Otto Klineberg shows (Klineberg, 1971). Amongst the Sioux Indians of South Dakota, it is regarded as incorrect to answer a question in the presence of others who do not know the answer. Such behaviour would be regarded as boastful and arrogant, and, since it reveals the ignorance of others, it would be interpreted as an attempt to undermine their confidence and shame them. In addition, the Sioux regard it as wrong to answer a question unless they are absolutely sure of the correct answer. Faced with a classroom of Sioux children, a white American teacher, who is unaware of their culture, might easily interpret their behaviour as a reflection of ignorance, stupidity or hostility.

Every society has certain common problems to deal with: for example the problem of dependent members such as the very young and the very old. However, solutions to such problems are culturally determined: they vary from society to society. The

solutions provided in one society may well be regarded as unacceptable by members of other societies.

Under certain circumstances, infanticide (the killing of infants) and geronticide (the killing of old people) have been practised by particular groups of Australian aborigines, Eskimos and Caribou Indians. Particularly in the more arid parts of Australia, female infanticide was practised to reduce the population in times of famine, and occasionally the baby was eaten. In Tasmania aborigine hunters led a nomadic life to take advantage of the seasonal food supply in different regions. The old and infirm who were too feeble to keep up with the band were left behind to die. The Caribou Indians, who lived to the west of Hudson Bay in Canada, were dependent for their food supply on the caribou herds. Sometimes, in winter, the herds failed to appear. To prevent the starvation of the whole community, the following priorities were established. First, the active male adults were fed, because if they were too weak to hunt, nobody would eat. Next, their wives were fed, since they could bear more children. Male infants were considered more important than female because they would grow up to become hunters. Old people were the most expendable and in times of famine they committed suicide by walking naked into the snow. If there were no old people left, girl babies would be killed. The practices of infanticide and geronticide described here are culturally defined behaviour patterns designed to ensure the survival of the group in times of extreme food shortages. Like many of the customs of non-Western societies, they appear strange and even heartless to Westerners, but, in the context of the particular society, they are sensible, rational and an accepted part of life.

The above examples of culturally defined behaviour have been selected because they differ considerably from behaviour patterns in Western society. By looking at examples that appear strange to us as Westerners, it is easier to appreciate the idea that human behaviour is largely determined by culture.

Socialization

The process by which individuals learn the culture of their society is known as socialization Primary socialization, probably the most important aspect of the socialization process, takes place during infancy, usually within the family. By responding to the approval and disapproval of its parents and copying their example, the child learns the language and many of the basic behaviour patterns of its society. In Western society, other important agencies of socialization include the educational system, the occupational group and the peer group (a group whose members share similar circumstances and are often of a similar age). Within its peer group, the young child, by interacting with others and playing childhood games, learns to conform to the accepted ways of a social group and to appreciate the fact that social life is based on rules.

Socialization is not, however, confined to childhood. It is a lifelong process. At the beginning of their working lives, the young bricklayer, teacher and accountant soon learn the rules of the game and the tricks of the trade. Should they change jobs in later life, they will join a different occupational group and may well have to learn new skills and adopt different mannerisms and styles of dress.

Without socialization, an individual would bear little resemblance to any human being defined as normal by the standards of his or her society. The following examples, though they lack the reliability demanded by today's standards of reporting, nevertheless provide some indication of the importance of socialization.

It is reported that Akbar, who was an emperor in India from 1542 to 1602, ordered that a group of children be brought up without any instruction in language, to test the belief that they would eventually speak Hebrew, the language of God. The children were raised by deaf mutes. They developed no spoken language and communicated solely by gestures.

There is also an extensive, though somewhat unreliable, literature on children raised by animals. One of the best-documented cases concerns the so-called 'wolf-children of Midnapore'. Two females, aged 2 and 8, were reportedly found in a wolf den in Bengal in 1920. They walked on all fours, preferred a diet of raw meat, they howled like wolves and lacked any form of speech. Whether these children had been raised by wolves or simply abandoned and left to their own devices in the forest is unclear. However, such examples indicate that socialization involving prolonged interaction with adults is essential not only for fitting new members into society but also to the process of actually becoming human.

Norms and values

Norms

Every culture contains a large number of guidelines that direct conduct in particular situations. Such guidelines are known as norms. A norm is a specific guide to action which defines acceptable and appropriate behaviour in particular situations. For example, in all societies, there are norms governing dress. Members of society generally share norms which define acceptable male and female apparel and appropriate dress for different age groups: for

example, in British society, a 70-year-old grandmother dressed as a teenager would contravene the norms for her age group. Norms of dress provide guidelines on what to wear on particular occasions. A formal dance, a funeral, a day out on the beach, a working day in the bank, on the building site or in the hospital – all these situations are governed by norms which specify appropriate attire for the occasion.

Norms of dress vary from society to society. For example, take the case of the male missionary who was presented with bare-breasted African females in his congregation. Flushed with embarrassment, he ordered a consignment of brassières. The women could make little sense of them in terms of their norms of dress. From their point of view, the most reasonable way to interpret these strange articles was to regard them as headgear. Much to the dismay of the missionary, they placed the two cups on the top of their heads and fastened the straps under their chins.

Norms are enforced by positive and negative sanctions, that is rewards and punishments. Sanctions can be informal, such as an approving or disapproving glance, or formal, such as a reward or a fine given by an official body. Continuing the example of norms of dress, an embarrassed silence, a hoot of derision or a contemptuous stare will make most members of society who have broken norms of dress change into more conventional attire. Usually the threat of negative sanctions is sufficient to enforce normal behaviour. Conversely, an admiring glance, a word of praise or an encouraging smile provide rewards for conformity to social norms. Certain norms are formalized by translation into laws which are enforced by official sanctions. In terms of laws governing dress, the nude bather on a public beach, the 'streaker' at a sporting event, and the 'flasher' who exposes himself or herself to an unsuspecting individual are all subject to official punishments of varying severity. Like informal sanctions, formal sanctions may be positive or negative. In terms of norms associated with dress, awards are made by official bodies such as tailors' organizations to the best-dressed men in Britain.

To summarize, norms define appropriate and acceptable behaviour in specific situations. They are enforced by positive and negative sanctions which may be formal or informal. The sanctions that enforce norms are a major part of the mechanisms of social control which are concerned with maintaining order in society.

Values

Unlike norms, which provide specific directives for conduct, values provide more general guidelines. A value is a belief that something is good and desirable. It defines what is important, worthwhile and worth striving for. It has often been suggested that individual achievement and materialism are major values in Western industrial society. Thus individuals believe it is important and desirable to come top of the class, to win a race or to reach the top of their chosen profession. Individual achievement is often symbolized and measured by the quality and quantity of material possessions that a person can accumulate. In the West, the value of materialism motivates individuals to invest time and energy producing and acquiring material possessions.

Like norms, values vary from society to society. The Sioux Indians placed a high value on generosity. In terms of Sioux values, the acquisitive individual of Western society would at best be regarded as peculiar and more probably would be condemned as grasping, self-seeking and anti-social.

Many norms can be seen as reflections of values. A variety of norms can be seen as expressions of a single value. In Western society the value placed on human life is expressed in terms of the following norms: the norms associated with hygiene in the home and in public places; the norms defining acceptable ways for settling an argument or dispute, which usually exclude physical violence and manslaughter; the array of rules and regulations dealing with transport and behaviour on the highway, which are concerned with protecting life and limb; and similar standards that apply to safety regulations in the workplace, particularly in mining and manufacturing industries. All of these norms concerned with the health and safety of members of society can be seen as expressions of the value placed on human life.

Many sociologists maintain that shared norms and values are essential for the operation of human society. Since humans have no instincts, their behaviour must be guided and regulated by norms. Without shared norms, members of society would be unable to cooperate or even comprehend the behaviour of others. Similar arguments apply to values. Without shared values, members of society would be unlikely to cooperate and work together. With differing or conflicting values they would often be pulling in different directions and pursuing incompatible goals. Disorder and disruption might well result. Thus an ordered and stable society requires shared norms and values. This viewpoint will be considered in greater detail in a later section.

Status and role

All members of society occupy a number of social positions known as statuses. In Western society, an individual will usually have an occupational status

such as bus driver, secretary or solicitor; a family status such as son or daughter, father or mother; and a gender status such as male or female. Statuses are culturally defined, despite the fact that they may be based on biological factors such as sex or race. For example, skin colour assigns individuals to racial statuses such as black and white, but this merely reflects the conventions of particular societies. Other biological characteristics such as hair colour have no connection with an individual's status, and in future societies skin colour may be equally insignificant.

Some statuses are relatively fixed and there is little individuals can do to change their assignment to particular social positions. Examples of such fixed or ascribed statuses include gender and aristocratic titles. On rare occasions, however, ascribed statuses can be changed. Edward VIII was forced to abdicate for insisting on marrying an American divorcée. Revolutions in America and Russia abolished the ascribed status of members of the aristocracy. Ascribed statuses are usually fixed at birth. In many societies occupational status has been or still is transmitted from father to son and from mother to daughter. Thus in the traditional Indian caste system, a son automatically entered the occupation of his father.

Statuses that are not fixed by inheritance, biological characteristics, or other factors over which the individual has no control, are known as achieved statuses. An achieved status is entered as a result of some degree of purposive action and choice. In Western society an individual's marital status and occupational status are achieved. However, as Chapter 2 on social stratification will indicate, the distinction between ascribed and achieved status is less clearcut than has so far been suggested.

Each status in society is accompanied by a number of norms that define how an individual occupying a particular status is expected to act. This group of norms is known as a role. Thus the status of husband is accompanied by the role of husband, the status of solicitor by the role of solicitor and so on. As an example, solicitors are expected to possess a detailed knowledge of certain aspects of the law, to support their client's interests and respect the confidentiality of their business. Solicitors' attire is expected to be sober, their manner restrained and confident yet understanding, their standing in the community beyond reproach. Playing or performing roles involves social relationships in the sense that an individual plays a role in relation to other roles. Thus the role of doctor is played in relation to the role of patient, the role of husband in relation to the role of wife. Individuals therefore interact in terms of roles.

Social roles regulate and organize behaviour. In particular, they provide the means for accomplishing certain tasks. It can be argued, for example, that teaching can be accomplished more effectively if teacher and student adopt their appropriate roles. This involves the exclusion of other areas of their lives in order to concentrate on the matter in hand. Roles provide social life with order and predictability. Interacting in terms of their respective roles, teacher and student know what to do and how to do it. With a knowledge of each other's roles they are able to predict and comprehend the actions of the other. As an aspect of culture, roles provide an important part of the guidelines and directives necessary for an ordered society.

This section has introduced some of the basic concepts used by many sociologists. In doing so, however, it has presented a somewhat one-sided view of human society. Individuals have been pictured rather like automatons who simply respond to the dictates of their culture. All members of a particular society appear to be produced from the same mould. They are all efficiently socialized in terms of a common culture. They share the same values, follow the same norms and play a variety of roles, adopting the appropriate behaviour for each. Clearly this picture of conformity has been overstated and the pervasive and constraining influence of culture has been exaggerated. There are two reasons for this. First, overstatement has been used to make the point. Second, many of the ideas presented so far derive from a particular perspective in sociology which has been subject to the criticisms noted above. This perspective, known as functionalism, will be examined later in this chapter (see pp. 9–11).

The development of human societies

Some sociologists believe that human societies have passed through certain broad phases of development. Many sociologists distinguish between premodern and modern societies. The distinction is a very general one and can neglect differences between the societies of each type. Nevertheless, the distinction is both influential and useful. It is useful because it has allowed sociologists to identify some of the key changes that have taken place in human history. They have then been able to discuss the significance of

these changes. Some sociologists, though by no means all, argue that a new type of society, the postmodern society, has recently developed or is developing.

In this section we will briefly introduce some of the main ideas associated with the distinctions between premodern, modern and postmodern societies. These concepts have a very important role in the development of sociological thinking and will be developed in detail throughout the book.

Premodern societies

Premodern societies took a number of forms. Anthony Giddens distinguishes between three main types, hunting and gathering societies, pastoral and agrarian societies and non-industrial civilizations (Giddens, 1997).

Hunting and gathering societies

The earliest human societies survived by gathering fruit, nuts and vegetables and by hunting or trapping animals for food. They usually consisted of small tribal groups often numbering fewer than fifty people. Such societies tended to have few possessions and little material wealth. What possessions they did have were shared. According to Giddens, they had relatively little inequality, although elder members of the tribe may have had more status and influence than younger ones. Hunting and gathering societies have largely disappeared, but Giddens calculates that some 250,000 people (just 0.0001 per cent of the world's population) still survive largely through hunting and gathering. Hunters and gatherers still exist in regions of Africa, New Guinea and Brazil, but few have remained untouched by the spread of Western culture.

Pastoral and agrarian societies

According to Giddens, these first emerged some 20,000 years ago. Pastoral societies may hunt and gather but they also keep and herd animals (for example cattle, camels or horses). Animal herds provide supplies of milk and meat and the animals may also be used as a means of transport. Unlike hunting and gathering societies, pastoral societies make it possible for individuals to accumulate wealth in the form of their animals. They therefore tend to have more inequality than hunting and gathering bands. They also tend to be nomadic, since they have to move around to find pasture for their animals. Because of this they are likely to come into contact with other groups. The individual societies have tended to be larger than hunting and gathering bands and in all may number as many as 250,000. There are still some pastoral societies in parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Agrarian societies rely largely upon the cultivation of crops to feed themselves. Like the herding of animals, this provides a more reliable and predictable source of food than hunting and gathering and it can therefore support much larger populations. Such societies are not likely to be nomadic. Food such as grain is often stored and it is possible for individuals to accumulate substantial personal wealth. Agrarian societies can therefore have considerable inequality. Agriculture remains the main way of earning a living in many parts of the world today. Giddens quotes 1990 figures which showed that over 90 per cent of the population of Nepal and Rwanda, over 80 per cent of the population of Uganda, and nearly 70 per cent of the Bangladeshi population worked in agriculture. However, the culture of contemporary agrarian societies has not remained entirely traditional. Most have been influenced by the culture of modern, industrial societies.

Non-industrial civilizations

These types of society first developed around 6000 BC. According to Giddens, they 'were based on the development of cities, showed very pronounced inequalities of wealth and power, and were associated with the rule of kings and emperors'. Compared to the hunting and gathering and early pastoral and agrarian societies, they were more developed in the areas of art and science and had more institutionalized and centralized systems of government. Non-industrial civilizations also invented writing. Some of these civilizations expanded across wide areas and developed their own empires. Examples of non-industrial civilizations include the Aztecs, the Maya and the Incas in South and Central America; Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire in Europe; Ancient Egypt in Africa; and Indian and Chinese civilizations in Asia. Most of them had substantial armed forces, and some, such as the Romans, managed major military conquests. None of these civilizations survived indefinitely and none exist today. Despite their importance, none has had as big an impact on the development of human society as modern industrial societies. These first emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Modern industrial societies

According to Lee and Newby, in the early nineteenth century 'there was widespread agreement among observers and commentators at this time that Northern Europe and North America were passing through the most profound transformation of society in the history of mankind' (Lee and Newby, 1983).

Lee and Newby identify four main transformations that took place:

1 Industrialism. The industrial revolution, which started in the late eighteenth century, transformed Britain, and later other societies, from economies based largely on agriculture to economies based largely on manufacturing. New technology led to massive increases in productivity, first in the cotton industry and then in other industries. An increasingly specialized division of labour developed, that is people had more specialist jobs. Social life was no longer governed by the rhythms of the seasons and of night and day; instead people's lives were based on the clock. Instead of working when the requirements of agriculture demanded, people started working long shifts of fixed periods (often twelve hours) in the new factories.

2 Capitalism. Closely connected to the development of industrialism was the development of capitalism. Capitalism involves wage labour and businesses run for the purpose of making a profit. Before the advent of capitalism many peasants worked for themselves, living off the produce they could get from their own land. Increasingly, peasants lost their land and had to rely upon earning a wage either as agricultural labourers or as workers in the developing factories. Capitalist businesses were developed with the aim of making a profit year after year. New classes emerged – principally a class of entrepreneurs who made their living by setting up and running capitalist businesses, and a working class of wage labourers employed in the entrepreneurs' factories.

3 Urbanism. The development of industry was accompanied by a massive movement from rural to urban areas. In Britain in 1750, before the industrial revolution, only two cities had populations of over 50,000 (London and Edinburgh). By 1851, 29 British cities had a population of more than 50,000. The population no longer needed to be thinly spread across agricultural land, and was increasingly concentrated in the centres of capitalist industry. Urbanism – the growth of towns and cities – brought with it numerous social problems such as crime, riots, and health problems caused by overcrowding and lack of sanitation. To many commentators the new towns and cities also destroyed the traditional sense of community that they associated with the rural villages. They believed that urbanism undermined the informal mechanisms of social control (such as gossip), which operated in close-knit communities, but which became ineffective in the anonymity of urban life.

4 Liberal democracy. Before the changes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the right of kings and queens to rule was rarely questioned (an exception being the English Civil War of the seventeenth century). The monarch was accepted as God's representative on earth, and their authority was not therefore open to question. However, in the French Revolution of 1789 the French monarchy was overthrown. Similarly British monarchical rule in America was overthrown by the American War of Independence (1775–1783). In both cases there was a new emphasis on the citizenship rights of individuals – individuals were now to have a say in how their countries were ruled rather than accepting what they were told by monarchs. This opened the way for the development of political parties and new perspectives on society. How society was to be run became more a matter for debate than it had ever been before.

Modernity

Taken together, the changes described above are often seen as characterizing modern societies, or as constituting an era of modernity. Modernity involves the following concepts: a belief in the possibility of human progress; rational planning to achieve objectives; a belief in the superiority of rational thought compared to emotion; faith in the ability of technology and science to solve human problems; a belief in the ability and rights of humans to shape their own lives; and a reliance upon manufacturing industry to improve living standards. Sociology developed alongside modernity and, not surprisingly, it has tended to be based upon similar foundations. Thus early sociological theories tended to believe that societies could and would progress, that scientific principles could be used to understand society, and that rational thought could be employed to ensure that society was organized to meet human needs. For most of its history, sociological thinking has been dominated by such approaches. However, some thinkers, including some sociologists, believe that modernity is being, or has been, replaced by an era of postmodernity

Postmodernity

Some sociologists believe that in recent years fundamental changes have taken place in Western societies. These changes have led to, or are in the process of leading to, a major break with the old concept of modernity. They suggest that people have begun to lose their faith in science and technology. They have become aware, for example, of the damaging effects of pollution, the dangers of nuclear war and the risks of genetic engineering. People have become more sceptical about the benefits of rational planning. For example, many people doubt that large, rational, bureaucratic organizations (such as big companies or the British National Heath Service) can meet human needs. They have lost faith in political beliefs and grand theories that claim to be able to improve society. Furthermore, few people now believe

that communism can lead to a perfect society. The modern belief in progress has therefore been undermined and there has been a movement away from science and rationalism. Some people have turned to non-rational beliefs such as New Age philosophies (see Chapter 7) and religious cults as a reaction against scientific rationalism.

According to some postmodernists, these changes are linked to changes in the economy. Industrial society has been superseded by post-industrial society. Relatively few people in Western societies now work in manufacturing industry. More and more are employed in services and particularly in jobs concerned with communications and information technology. Computer technology has meant that fewer and fewer people are needed to work in manufacturing, and communications have become very much faster. Furthermore, in affluent Western countries people are spending a higher proportion of their income on leisure. When they purchase products it is often as much for the image that they represent as the quality and usefulness of the product. Thus people will pay high prices for clothes with designer labels. The media has become increasingly important in people's lives and in the economy.

Although some of these changes have undoubtedly taken place, some sociologists do not believe that the changes are sufficiently large and significant to justify the claim that there has been a shift from modern to postmodern society. Others believe not just that *societies* have changed, but also that new *theories* of society are necessary. Their views will be examined after we have considered some of the longer-established sociological theories.

Theories of society

In this section we will examine some of the most influential theories of society. A theory is a set of ideas which claims to explain how something works. A sociological theory is therefore a set of ideas which claims to explain how society or aspects of society work. The theories in this section represent only a selection from the range of modern sociological theories. They have been simplified and condensed to provide a basic introduction. Since they are applied to various topics throughout the text, an initial awareness is essential. Criticism of the theories has been omitted from this chapter for the sake of simplicity, but it will be dealt with throughout the text and in detail in the final chapter.

There are many variations on the basic theories examined in this chapter. Again, for simplicity, most of these variations will not be mentioned at this stage, but will be introduced when they become relevant to particular topics.

Functionalism

Functionalism first emerged in nineteenth-century Europe. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim was the most influential of the early functionalists. The theory was developed by American sociologists such as Talcott Parsons in the twentieth century, and it became the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology during the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in the USA. From the mid-1960s onwards its popularity steadily declined, due partly to damaging criticism, partly to competing perspectives which appeared to provide superior explanations, and partly to changes in fashion. The key points of the functionalist perspective may be summarized by a comparison drawn from biology. If biologists wanted to know how an organism such as the human body worked, they might begin by examining the various parts such as the brain, lungs, heart and liver. However, if they simply analysed the parts in isolation from each other, they would be unable to explain how life was maintained. To do this, they would have to examine the parts in relation to each other, since they work together to maintain the organism. Therefore they would analyse the relationships between the heart, lungs, brain and so on to understand how they operated and appreciate their importance. In other words, any part of the organism must be seen in terms of the organism as a whole.

Functionalism adopts a similar perspective. The various parts of society are seen to be interrelated and, taken together, they form a complete system. To understand any part of society, such as the family or religion, the part must be seen in relation to society as a whole. Thus where a biologist will examine a part of the body, such as the heart, in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the human organism, the functionalist will examine a part of society, such as the family, in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the social system.

Structure

Functionalism begins with the observation that behaviour in society is structured. This means that relationships between members of society are organized in terms of rules. Social relationships are

therefore patterned and recurrent. Values provide general guidelines for behaviour, and they are translated into more specific directives in terms of roles and norms. The structure of society can be seen as the sum total of normative behaviour – the sum total of social relationships, which are governed by norms. The main parts of society, its institutions – such as the family, the economy, and the educational and political systems – are major aspects of the social structure. Thus an institution can be seen as a structure made up of interconnected roles or interrelated norms. For example, the family is made up of the interconnected roles of husband, father, wife, mother, son and daughter. Social relationships within the family are structured in terms of a set of related norms.

Function

Having established the existence of a social structure, functionalist analysis turns to a consideration of how that structure functions. This involves an examination of the relationship between the different parts of the structure and their relationship to society as a whole. This examination reveals the functions of institutions. At its simplest, function means effect. Thus the function of the family is the effect it has on other parts of the social structure and on society as a whole. In practice, the term function is usually used to indicate the contribution an institution makes to the maintenance and survival of the social system. For example, a major function of the family is the socialization of new members of society. This represents an important contribution to the maintenance of society, since order, stability and cooperation largely depend on learned, shared norms and values.

Functional prerequisites

In determining the functions of various parts of the social structure, functionalists are guided by the following ideas. Societies have certain basic needs or requirements that must be met if they are to survive. These requirements are sometimes known as functional prerequisites. For example, a means of producing food and shelter may be seen as a functional prerequisite, since without food and shelter members of society could not survive. A system for socializing new members of society may also be regarded as a functional prerequisite, since, without culture, social life would not be possible. Having assumed a number of basic requirements for the survival of society, the next step is to look at the parts of the social structure to see how they meet such functional prerequisites. Thus a major function of the economic system is the production of food and shelter. An important function of the family is the socialization of new members of society.

Value consensus

From a functionalist perspective, society is regarded as a system. A system is an entity made up of interconnected and interrelated parts. From this viewpoint, it follows that each part will in some way affect every other part and the system as a whole. It also follows that, if the system is to survive, its various parts must have some degree of fit or compatibility. Thus a functional prerequisite of society involves at least a minimal degree of integration between the parts. Many functionalists argue that this integration is based largely on value consensus, that is on agreement about values by members of society. Thus if the major values of society are expressed in the various parts of the social structure, those parts will be integrated. For example, it can be argued that the value of materialism integrates many parts of the social structure in Western industrial society. The economic system produces a large range of goods, and ever-increasing productivity is regarded as an important goal. The educational system is partly concerned with producing the skills and expertise to expand production and increase its efficiency. The family is an important unit of consumption with its steadily rising demand for consumer durables such as washing machines, videos and microwaves. The political system is partly concerned with improving material living standards and raising productivity. To the extent that these parts of the social structure are based on the same values, they may be said to be integrated.

Social order

One of the main concerns of functionalist theory is to explain how social life is possible. The theory assumes that a certain degree of order and stability is essential for the survival of social systems. Functionalism is therefore concerned with explaining the origin and maintenance of order and stability in society. Many functionalists see shared values as the key to this explanation: value consensus integrates the various parts of society. It forms the basis of social unity or social solidarity since individuals will tend to identify and feel kinship with those who share the same values as themselves. Value consensus provides the foundation for cooperation since common values produce common goals. Members of society will tend to cooperate in pursuit of goals that they share.

Having attributed such importance to value consensus, many functionalists then focus on the question of how this consensus is maintained. Indeed the American sociologist Talcott Parsons has stated that the main task of sociology is to examine 'the institutionalization of patterns of value orientation in

the social system'. Emphasis is therefore placed on the process of socialization whereby values are internalized and transmitted from one generation to the next. In this respect, the family is regarded as a vital part of the social structure. Once learned, values must be maintained. In particular those who deviate from society's values must be brought back into line. Thus the mechanisms of social control discussed earlier in the chapter are seen as essential to the maintenance of social order.

In summary, society, from a functionalist perspective, is a system made up of interrelated parts. The social system has certain basic needs that must be met if it is to survive. These needs are known as functional prerequisites. The function of any part of society is its contribution to the maintenance of society. The major functions of social institutions are those that help to meet the functional prerequisites of society. Since society is a system, there must be some degree of integration between its parts. A minimal degree of integration is therefore a functional prerequisite of society. The progress of society is best achieved through maintaining order and then allowing society to evolve naturally without too much planning. Many functionalists maintain that the order and stability they see as essential for the maintenance of the social system are largely provided by value consensus. This means that an investigation of the source of value consensus is a major concern of functionalist analysis.

Conflict perspectives

Although functionalists emphasize the importance of value consensus in society, they do recognize that conflict can occur. However, they see conflict as being the result of temporary disturbances in the social system. These disturbances are usually quickly corrected as society evolves. Functionalists accept that social groups can have differences of interest, but these are of minor importance compared to the interests that all social groups share in common. They believe that all social groups benefit if their society runs smoothly and prospers.

Conflict theories differ from functionalism in that they hold that there are fundamental differences of interest between social groups. These differences result in conflict being a common and persistent feature of society, and not a temporary aberration.

There are a number of different conflict perspectives and their supporters tend to disagree about the precise nature, causes and extent of conflict. For the sake of simplicity, in this introductory chapter we will concentrate upon two conflict theories: Marxism and feminism. Other conflict theories will be introduced later in the book. (For example, the influential conflict theory of Max Weber is dealt with in Chapter 2, pp. 36–8.)

Marxism

Marxist theory offers a radical alternative to functionalism. It became increasingly influential in sociology during the 1970s, partly because of the decline of functionalism, partly because it promised to provide answers that functionalism failed to provide, and partly because it was more in keeping with the tenor and mood of the times. 'Marxism' takes its name from its founder, the German-born philosopher, economist and sociologist, Karl Marx (1818–83). The following account is a simplified version of Marxist theory. It must also be seen as one interpretation of that theory: Marx's extensive writings have been variously interpreted and, since his death, several schools of Marxism have developed. (See Marx and Engels, 1949, 1950 for extracts from Marx's most important writings.)

Contradiction and conflict

Marxist theory begins with the simple observation that, in order to survive, humans must produce food and material objects. In doing so they enter into social relationships with other people. From the simple hunting band to the complex industrial state, production is a social enterprise. Production also involves a technical component known as the forces of production, which includes the technology, raw materials and scientific knowledge employed in the process of production. Each major stage in the development of the forces of production will correspond with a particular form of the social relationships of production. This means that the forces of production in a hunting economy will correspond with a particular set of social relationships.

Taken together, the forces of production and the social relationships of production form the economic basis or infrastructure of society. The other aspects of society, known as the superstructure, are largely shaped by the infrastructure. Thus the political, legal and educational institutions and the belief and value systems are primarily determined by economic factors. A major change in the infrastructure will therefore produce a corresponding change in the superstructure.

Marx maintained that, with the possible exception of the societies of prehistory, all historical societies contain basic contradictions, which means that they cannot survive forever in their existing form. These contradictions involve the exploitation of one social group by another: in feudal society, lords exploit their serfs; in capitalist society, employers exploit

their employees. This creates a fundamental conflict of interest between social groups since one gains at the expense of another. This conflict of interest must ultimately be resolved since a social system containing such contradictions cannot survive unchanged.

We will now examine the points raised in this brief summary of Marxist theory in greater detail. The major contradictions in society are between the forces and relations of production. The forces of production include land, raw materials, tools and machinery, the technical and scientific knowledge used in production, the technical organization of the production process, and the labour power of the workers. The 'relations of production' are the social relationships which people enter into in order to produce goods. Thus in feudal society they include the relationship between the lord and vassal, and the set of rights, duties and obligations which make up that relationship. In capitalist industrial society they include the relationship between employer and employee and the various rights of the two parties. The relations of production also involve the relationship of social groups to the means and forces of production.

The means of production consist of those parts of the forces of production that can be legally owned. They therefore include land, raw materials, machinery, buildings and tools, but not technical knowledge or the organization of the production process. Under capitalism, labour power is not one of the means of production since the workers are free to sell their labour. In slave societies, though, labour power is one of the means of production since the workforce is actually owned by the social group in power. In feudal society, land, the major means of production, is owned by the lord, whereas the serf has the right to use land in return for services or payment to the lord. In Western industrial society, the capitalists own the means of production, whereas the workers own only their labour, which they hire to the employer in return for wages.

Exploitation and oppression

The idea of contradiction between the forces and relations of production may be illustrated in terms of the infrastructure of capitalist industrial society. Marx maintained that only labour produces wealth. Thus wealth in capitalist society is produced by the labour power of the workers. However, much of this wealth is appropriated in the form of profits by the capitalists, the owners of the means of production. The wages of the workers are well below the value of the wealth they produce. There is thus a contradiction between the forces of production, in particular the labour power of the workers which produces wealth, and the relations of production which involve the appropriation of much of that wealth by the capitalists.

A related contradiction involves the technical organization of labour and the nature of ownership. In capitalist society, the forces of production include the collective production of goods by large numbers of workers in factories. Yet the means of production are privately owned, and the profits are appropriated by individuals. The contradiction between the forces and relations of production lies in the social and collective nature of production and the private and individual nature of ownership. Marx believed that these and other contradictions would eventually lead to the downfall of the capitalist system. He maintained that, by its very nature, capitalism involves the exploitation and oppression of the worker. He believed that the conflict of interest between capital and labour, which involves one group gaining at the expense of the other, could not be resolved within the framework of a capitalist economy.

Contradiction and change

Marx saw history as divided into a number of time periods or epochs, each being characterized by a particular mode of production. Major changes in history are the result of new forces of production. Thus the change from feudal to capitalist society stemmed from the emergence, during the feudal epoch, of the forces of production of industrial society. This resulted in a contradiction between the new forces of production and the old feudal relations of production. Capitalist industrial society required relations of production based on wage labour rather than the traditional ties of lord and vassal. When they reach a certain point in their development, the new forces of production will lead to the creation of a new set of relations of production. Then, a new epoch of history will be born which will sweep away the social relationships of the old order.

However, the final epoch of history, the communist or socialist society that Marx believed would eventually supplant capitalism, will not result from a new force of production. Rather it will develop from a resolution of the contradictions contained within the capitalist system. Collective production will remain but the relations of production will be transformed. Ownership of the means of production will be collective rather than individual, and members of society will share the wealth that their labour produces. No longer will one social group exploit and oppress another. This will produce an infrastructure without contradiction and conflict. In Marx's view this would mean the end of history since communist society would no longer contain the contradictions which generate change.

Ideology and false consciousness

In view of the contradictions that beset historical societies, it appears difficult to explain their survival. Despite its internal contradictions, capitalism has continued in the West for over 200 years. This continuity can be explained in large part by the nature of the superstructure. In all societies the superstructure is largely shaped by the infrastructure. In particular, the relations of production are reflected and reproduced in the various institutions, values and beliefs that make up the superstructure. Thus the relationships of domination and subordination found in the infrastructure will also be found in social institutions. The dominant social group or ruling class, that is the group which owns and controls the means of production, will largely monopolize political power, and its position will be supported by laws which are framed to protect and further its interests.

In the same way, beliefs and values will reflect and legitimate the relations of production. Members of the ruling class produce the dominant ideas in society. These ideas justify their power and privilege and conceal from all members of society the basis of exploitation and oppression on which their dominance rests. Thus, under feudalism, honour and loyalty were 'dominant concepts' of the age. Vassals owed loyalty to their lords and were bound by an oath of allegiance that encouraged the acceptance of their status. In terms of the dominant concepts of the age, feudalism appeared as the natural order of things. Under capitalism, exploitation is disguised by the ideas of equality and freedom. The relationship between capitalist and wage labourer is defined as an equal exchange. The capitalist buys the labour power that the worker offers for hire. The worker is defined as a free agent since he or she has the freedom to choose his or her employer. In reality, equality and freedom are illusions: the employer–employee relationship is not equal. It is an exploitative relationship. Workers are not free since they are forced to work for the capitalist in order to survive. All they can do is exchange one form of 'wage slavery' for another.

Marx refers to the dominant ideas of each epoch as ruling class ideology. Ideology is a distortion of reality, a false picture of society. It blinds members of society to the contradictions and conflicts of interest that are built into their relationships. As a result they tend to accept their situation as normal and natural, right and proper. In this way a false consciousness of reality is produced which helps to maintain the system. However, Marx believed that ruling class ideology could only slow down the disintegration of the system. The contradictions embedded in the structure of society must eventually find expression.

In summary, the key to understanding society from a Marxist perspective involves an analysis of the infrastructure. In all historical societies there are basic contradictions between the forces and relations of production, and there are fundamental conflicts of interest between the social groups involved in the production process. In particular, the relationship between the major social groups is one of exploitation and oppression. The superstructure derives largely from the infrastructure and therefore reproduces the social relationships of production. It will thus reflect the interests of the dominant group in the relations of production. Ruling class ideology distorts the true nature of society and serves to legitimate and justify the status quo. However the contradictions in the infrastructure will eventually lead to a disintegration of the system and the creation of a new society in which there is no exploitation and oppression.

Although highly critical of capitalism, Marx did see it as a stepping stone on the way towards a communist society. Capitalism would help to develop technology that would free people from material need; there would be more than enough goods to feed and clothe the population. In these circumstances it would be possible to establish successful communist societies in which the needs of all their members were met. Despite its pessimistic tone, Marxism shares with functionalism the modern belief that human societies will improve, and that rational, scientific thinking can be used to ensure progress.

Feminism

There are several different versions of feminism but most share a number of features in common. Like Marxists, feminists tend to see society as divided into different social groups. Unlike Marxists, they see the major division as being between men and women rather than between different classes. Like Marxists, they tend to see society as characterized by exploitation. Unlike Marxists, they see the exploitation of women by men as the most important source of exploitation, rather than that of the working class by the ruling class. Many feminists characterize contemporary societies as patriarchal, that is they are dominated by men. For example, feminists have argued that men have most of the power in families, that they tend to be employed in better-paid and higher-status jobs than women, and that they tend to monopolize positions of political power. The ultimate aim of these types of feminism is to end men's domination and to rid society of the exploitation of women. Such feminists advance a range of explanations for, and solutions to, the exploitation of women. However,

they all believe that the development of society can be explained and that progress towards an improved future is possible.

Some feminist writers (sometimes called difference feminists) disagree that all women are equally oppressed and disadvantaged in contemporary societies. They believe that it is important to recognize the different experiences and problems faced by various groups of women. For example, they do not believe that all husbands oppress their wives, that women are equally disadvantaged in all types of work, or that looking after children is necessarily oppressive to women. They emphasize the differences between women of different ages, class backgrounds and ethnic groups. Like other feminists, they believe that the oppression of women exists, but they do not see it as affecting all women to the same extent and in the same way. For example, a wealthy white woman in a rich capitalist country is in a very different position to a poor black woman living in an impoverished part of Africa. Since their problems are different, they would require very different solutions.

Despite their disagreements, feminists tend to agree that, at least until recently, sociology has neglected women. Certainly until the 1970s sociology was largely written by men about men. There were relatively few studies of women, and issues of particular concern to women (such as housework and women's health) were rarely studied. A number of feminists criticize what they call malestream sociology. By this they mean mainstream, male-dominated sociology. They have attacked not just what male sociologists study, but also how they carry out their studies. For example, they have suggested that feminist sociology should get away from rigid 'scientific' methods and should adopt more sympathetic approaches. These can involve working in partnership with those being studied rather than treating them as simply the passive providers of data (see Chapter 4).

As feminist scholarship has developed it has started to examine numerous aspects of social life from feminist viewpoints. Many of the resulting studies will be examined in later chapters. (Feminist perspectives are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.)

Interactionism

Functionalism and Marxism have a number of other characteristics in common. First, they offer a general explanation of society as a whole, and as a result are sometimes known as macro-theories. Second, they regard society as a system, hence they are sometimes referred to as system theories. Third, they tend to see human behaviour as shaped by the system. In terms of Talcott Parsons's version of functionalism, behaviour is largely directed by the norms and values of the social system. From a Marxist viewpoint, behaviour is ultimately determined by the economic infrastructure. Some versions of feminism have similar characteristics in that they explain how society works in terms of the existence of a patriarchal system and explain the behaviour of males and females in terms of that system. (Other feminist theories are very different and share some features in common with interactionism.)

Interactionism differs from functionalism, Marxism and most feminist theories in that it focuses on small-scale interaction rather than society as a whole. It usually rejects the notion of a social system. As a result it does not regard human action as a response or reaction to the system. Interactionists believe that it is possible to analyse society systematically and that it is possible to improve society. However, improvements have to be made on a smaller scale and in a more piecemeal way than those implied by macro or system theories.

Meaning and interpretation

As its name suggests, interactionism is concerned with interaction, which means action between individuals. The interactionist perspective seeks to understand this process. It begins from the assumption that action is meaningful to those involved. It therefore follows that an understanding of action requires an interpretation of the meanings that the actors give to their activities. Picture a man and a woman in a room and the man lighting a candle. This action is open to a number of interpretations. The couple may simply require light because a fuse has blown or a power cut has occurred. Or, they may be involved in some form of ritual in which the lighted candle has a religious significance. Alternatively, the man or woman may be trying to create a more intimate atmosphere as a prelude to a sexual encounter. Finally, the couple may be celebrating a birthday, a wedding anniversary or some other red-letter day. In each case a different meaning is attached to the act of lighting a candle. To understand the act, it is therefore necessary to discover the meaning held by the actors.

Meanings are not fixed entities. As the above example shows, they depend in part on the context of the interaction. Meanings are also created, developed, modified and changed within the actual process of interaction. A pupil entering a new class may initially define the situation as threatening and even hostile. This definition may be confirmed, modified or changed depending on the pupil's perception of the interaction that takes place in the classroom. The pupil may come to perceive the teacher and fellow

pupils as friendly and understanding and so change his or her assessment of the situation. The way in which actors define situations has important consequences. It represents their reality in terms of which they structure their actions. For example, if the pupil maintains a definition of the classroom as threatening and hostile, they may say little and speak only when spoken to. Conversely if the definition changed, there would probably be a corresponding change in the pupil's actions in that context.

Self-concepts

The actions of the pupil in the above example will depend in part on their interpretation of the way others see them. For this reason many interactionists place particular emphasis on the idea of the self. They suggest that individuals develop a self-concept, a picture of themselves, which has an important influence on their actions. A self-concept develops from interaction processes, since it is in large part a reflection of the reactions of others towards the individual: hence the term looking glass self coined by Charles Cooley (1864–1929) (discussed in Coser, 1977). Actors tend to act in terms of their self-concept. Thus if they are consistently defined as disreputable or respectable, servile or arrogant, they will tend to see themselves in this light and act accordingly.

The construction of meaning

Since interactionists are concerned with definitions of situation and self, they are also concerned with the process by which those definitions are constructed. For example, how does an individual come to be defined in a certain way? The answer to this question involves an investigation of the construction of meaning in interaction processes. This requires an analysis of the way actors interpret the language, gestures, appearance and manner of others and their interpretation of the context in which the interaction takes place.

The definition of an individual as a delinquent is an example. Research has indicated that police are more likely to perceive an act as delinquent if it occurs in a low-income inner city area. The context will influence the action of the police since they typically define the inner city as a 'bad area'. Once arrested, a male youth is more likely to be defined as a juvenile delinquent if his manner is interpreted as aggressive and uncooperative, if his appearance is seen as unconventional or slovenly, if his speech is defined as ungrammatical or slang, and if his posture gives the impression of disrespect for authority, or arrogance. Thus the black American youth from the inner city ghetto with his cool, arrogant manner and colourful clothes is more likely to be defined as a delinquent than the white 'all-American girl' from the tree-lined suburbs.

Definitions of individuals as certain kinds of persons are not, however, simply based on preconceptions which actors bring to interaction situations. For example, the police will not automatically define black juveniles involved in a fight as delinquent and white juveniles involved in a similar activity as non-delinquent. A process of negotiation occurs from which the definition emerges. Often negotiations will reinforce preconceptions, but not necessarily. The young blacks may be able to convince the police officer that the fight was a friendly brawl which did not involve intent to injure or steal. In this way they may successfully promote images of themselves as high-spirited teenagers rather than as malicious delinquents. Definitions and meanings are therefore constructed in interaction situations by a process of negotiation.

Negotiation and roles

The idea of negotiation is also applied to the concept of role. Like functionalists, the interactionists employ the concept of role but they adopt a somewhat different perspective. Functionalists imply that roles are provided by the social system, and individuals enact their roles as if they were reading off a script that contains explicit directions for their behaviour. Interactionists argue that roles are often unclear, ambiguous and vague. This lack of clarity provides actors with considerable room for negotiation, manoeuvre, improvisation and creative action. At most, roles provide very general guidelines for action. What matters is how they are employed in interaction situations.

For example, two individuals enter marriage with a vague idea about the roles of husband and wife. Their interaction will not be constrained by these roles. Their definition of what constitutes a husband, a wife, and a marital relationship will be negotiated and continually renegotiated. It will be fluid rather than fixed, changeable rather than static. Thus, from an interactionist perspective, roles, like meanings and definitions of the situation, are negotiated in interaction processes.

In summary, interactionism focuses on the process of interaction in particular contexts. Since all action is meaningful, it can only be understood by discovering the meanings that actors assign to their activities. Meanings both direct action and derive from action. They are not fixed but constructed and negotiated in interaction situations. From their interaction with others, actors develop a self-concept. This has important consequences since individuals tend to act in terms of their definition of self. Understanding the construction of meanings and

self-concepts involves an appreciation of the way actors interpret the process of interaction. This requires an investigation of the way in which they perceive the context of the interaction and the manner, appearance and actions of others.

While interactionists admit the existence of roles, they regard them as vague and imprecise and therefore as open to negotiation. From an interactionist perspective, action proceeds from negotiated meanings that are constructed in ongoing interaction situations.

Postmodernism

The challenge to modernism

Since the 1980s, postmodern perspectives have become increasingly influential in sociology. These perspectives take a number of forms, and the more radical of these represent a major challenge to the perspectives examined so far.

Some postmodern theorists content themselves with describing and explaining what they see as the crucial changes in society. They retain elements of conventional approaches in sociology. For example, they still believe that it is possible to explain both human behaviour and the ways in which societies are changing. They no longer assume that the changes are progressive, but they stick to a belief that they can be explained through developing sociological theories. Some postmodernists go much further than this. They argue that conventional, modern approaches in sociology, which grew out of modern society, must be abandoned. While approaches such as Marxism, functionalism, feminism and interactionism might have explained how the social world worked in previous eras, they are no longer useful. New theories are needed for the postmodern age. They support this claim in two main ways.

First, some postmodernists argue that social behaviour is no longer shaped as it used to be by people's background and their socialization. They argue that factors such as class, ethnic group and whether people are male or female influence people a great deal less than they used to. Instead, people are much freer to choose their own identity and lifestyle. Thus, for example, people can choose whether to be heterosexual or homosexual, they have more choice about where they live and where they travel to, what sort of people they mix with and what clothes they wear. The boundaries between social groups are breaking down and you can no longer predict the sorts of lifestyles that people will adopt. If so much choice exists, then many of the aspects of social life studied by modern sociologists are no longer important and their studies are no longer useful.

Second, some postmodernists question the belief that there is any solid foundation for producing knowledge about society. They argue that modern sociologists were quite wrong to believe that sociology could discover the truth by adopting the methods of physical sciences. From their perspective, all knowledge is based upon the use of language. Language can never describe the external world perfectly. Knowledge is essentially subjective – it expresses personal viewpoints which can never be proved to be correct. Postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard argue that it has become increasingly difficult to separate media images from anything even approximating to reality (see Chapter 15). Society has become so saturated with media images that people now confuse, for example, media characters with real life. An example of this occurred when some viewers launched a campaign to free Deirdre Rashid (a character in the British soap opera *Coronation Street*) from prison.

Postmodernists such as Jean François Lyotard (see Chapter 15) are particularly critical of any attempt to produce a general theory of how society works (for example Marxism or functionalism). Lyotard believes that all attempts to produce such theories are doomed to failure. They cannot truly explain something as complex as the social world. Generally such theories are simply used by groups of people to try to impose their ideas on other people, for example in communist or fascist societies. General theories are therefore dangerous and should always be rejected. In Lyotard's view, modern sociological theories fall into this category and should be rejected.

Difference

Many writers who adopt some of the stronger claims of postmodernism emphasize differences between people rather than similarities between members of social groups. They believe that it is the job of the researcher to uncover and describe these differences rather than to make generalizations about whole social groups. This involves acknowledging that there are many different viewpoints on society and that you should not judge between them. All viewpoints are seen as being equally valid; none is superior to any other. Sociologists should not try to impose their views on others, but should merely enable the voices of different people to be heard. This is very different from the goals of other sociologists (such as Marxists and functionalists) who set out to produce scientific explanations of how society works and how social groups behave.

Postmodern perspectives will be examined and evaluated in more detail later in relation to particular topics. The theory of postmodernism will be discussed in detail in Chapter 15.

Views of human behaviour

The last section looked briefly at five theoretical perspectives in sociology. This section deals with philosophical views of human behaviour. These views have influenced both the type of data sociologists have collected and the methods they have employed to collect the data.

Views of human behaviour can be roughly divided into those that emphasize external factors and those that stress internal factors. The former approach sees behaviour as being influenced by the structure of society. The latter approach places more emphasis upon the subjective states of individuals: their feelings, the meanings they attach to events, and the motives they have for behaving in particular ways. The use of this 'dichotomy' (sharply defined division) is somewhat artificial. In practice most sociologists make use of the insights provided by both approaches when carrying out research and interpreting the results. There are also a number of variations on each approach. For example, as a later section will show, phenomenologists differ in their approach from other sociologists who emphasize the importance of internal influences upon human behaviour.

Positivism

Many of the founders of sociology believed it would be possible to create a science of society based upon the same principles and procedures as the natural sciences such as chemistry and biology, even though the natural sciences often deal with inanimate matter and so are not concerned with feeling, emotions and other subjective states. The most influential attempt to apply natural science methodology to sociology is known as positivism.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who is credited with inventing the term sociology and regarded as one of the founders of the discipline, maintained that the application of the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences would produce a 'positive science of society'. He believed that this would reveal that the evolution of society followed 'invariable laws'. It would show that the behaviour of humans was governed by principles of cause and effect that were just as invariable as the behaviour of matter, the subject of the natural sciences.

In terms of sociology, the positivist approach makes the following assumptions. The behaviour of humans, like the behaviour of matter, can be objectively measured. Just as the behaviour of matter can be quantified by measures such as weight, temperature and pressure, methods of objective measurement can be devised for human behaviour. Such measurement is essential to explain behaviour.

For example, in order to explain the reaction of a particular chemical to heat, it is necessary to provide exact measurements of temperature, weight and so on. With the aid of such measurements it will be possible to observe accurately the behaviour of matter and produce a statement of cause and effect. This statement might read $A \times B = C$ where A is a quantity of matter, B a degree of heat and C a volume of gas. Once it has been shown that the matter in question always reacts in the same way under fixed conditions, a theory can be devised to explain its behaviour.

From a positivist viewpoint such methods and assumptions are applicable to human behaviour. Observations of behaviour based on objective measurement will make it possible to produce statements of cause and effect. Theories may then be devised to explain observed behaviour.

The positivist approach in sociology places particular emphasis on behaviour that can be directly observed. It argues that factors that are not directly observable – such as meanings, feelings and purposes – are not particularly important and can be misleading. For example, if the majority of adult members of society enter into marriage and produce children, these facts can be observed and quantified. They therefore form reliable data. However, the range of meanings that members of society give to these activities – their reasons for marriage and procreation – are not directly observable. Even if they could be accurately measured, they might well divert attention from the real cause of behaviour. One person might believe they entered marriage because they were lonely, another because they were in love, a third because it was the 'thing to do', and a fourth because they wished to have children. Reliance on this type of data for explanation assumes that individuals know the reasons for marriage. This can obscure the real cause of their behaviour.

The positivists' emphasis on observable 'facts' is due largely to the belief that human behaviour can be explained in much the same way as the behaviour of matter. Natural scientists do not inquire into the meanings and purposes of matter. Atoms and molecules do not act in terms of meanings, they simply react to external stimuli. Thus if heat, an external stimulus, is applied to matter, that matter will react. The job of the natural scientist is to observe, measure, and then explain that reaction.

The positivist approach to human behaviour applies a similar logic. People react to external stimuli and their behaviour can be explained in terms of this reaction. They enter into marriage and produce children in response to the demands of society: society requires such behaviour for its survival and its members simply respond to this requirement. The meanings and purposes they attach to this behaviour are largely inconsequential.

It has often been argued that systems theory in sociology adopts a positivist approach. Once behaviour is seen as a response to some external stimulus (such as economic forces or the requirements of the social system), the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences appear appropriate to the study of humans. Marxism has sometimes been regarded as a positivist approach, since it can be argued that it sees human behaviour as a reaction to the stimulus of the economic infrastructure. Functionalism has been viewed in a similar light. The behaviour of members of society can be seen as a response to the functional prerequisites of the social system. These views of systems theory represent a considerable oversimplification. However, it is probably fair to say that systems theory is closer to a positivist approach than the views that will now be considered.

Social action perspectives

Advocates of social action perspectives argue that the subject matter of the social and natural sciences is fundamentally different. As a result, the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences are inappropriate to the study of humans. The natural sciences deal with matter. To understand and explain the behaviour of matter it is sufficient to observe it from the outside. Atoms and molecules do not have consciousness: they do not have meanings and purposes that direct their behaviour. Matter simply reacts unconsciously to external stimuli; in scientific language, it 'behaves'. As a result, the natural scientist is able to observe, measure, and impose an external logic on that behaviour in order to explain it. Scientists have no need to explore the internal logic of the consciousness of matter simply because it does not exist.

Unlike matter, humans have consciousness – thoughts, feelings, meanings, intentions and an awareness of being. Because of this, humans' actions are meaningful: they define situations and give meaning to their actions and those of others. As a result, they do not just react to external stimuli, they do not merely behave – they act.

Imagine the response of early humans to fire caused by volcanoes or spontaneous combustion. They did not simply react in a uniform manner to the experience of heat. They attached a range of meanings to it and these meanings directed their actions. They defined fire as a means of warmth and used it to heat their dwellings; they saw it as a means of defence and used it to ward off wild animals; and they saw it as a means of transforming substances and employed it for cooking and hardening the points of wooden spears. Humans do not just react to fire, they act upon it in terms of the meanings they give to it.

If action stems from subjective meanings, it follows that the sociologist must discover those meanings in order to understand action. Sociologists cannot simply observe action from the outside and impose an external logic upon it. They must interpret the internal logic that directs the actions of the actor.

Max Weber (1864–1920) was one of the first sociologists to outline this perspective in detail. He argued that sociological explanations of action should begin with observing and interpreting the subjective 'states of minds' of people. As the previous section indicated, interactionism adopts a similar approach, with particular emphasis on the process of interaction. Where positivists emphasize facts and cause-and-effect relationships, interactionists emphasize insight and understanding. Since it is not possible to get inside the heads of actors, the discovery of meaning must be based on interpretation and intuition. For this reason, objective measurement is not possible and the exactitude of the natural sciences cannot be duplicated. Since meanings are constantly negotiated in ongoing interaction processes, it is not possible to establish simple cause-and-effect relationships. Thus some sociologists argue that sociology is limited to an interpretation of social action.

Nevertheless, both Weber and the interactionists did think it was possible to produce causal explanations of human behaviour, so long as an understanding of meanings formed part of those explanations. Some sociologists, particularly phenomenologists, take the argument further and claim that it is impossible for sociologists to find the causes of human action.

Phenomenology

To phenomenologists, it is impossible to measure objectively any aspect of human behaviour. Humans make sense of the world by categorizing it. Through language they distinguish between different types of objects, events, actions and people. For instance, some actions are defined as criminal and others are not; similarly some people are defined as criminals while others are seen as law-abiding. The process of

categorization is subjective: it depends upon the opinions of the observer. Statistics are simply the product of the opinions of those who produce them. Thus crime statistics are produced by the police and the courts, and they represent no more than the opinions of the individuals involved. If sociologists produce their own statistics, these too are the result of subjective opinions – in this case the opinions of sociologists.

Phenomenologists believe that it is impossible to produce factual data and that it is therefore impossible to produce and check causal explanations. The most that sociologists can hope to do is to understand the meaning that individuals give to particular phenomena. Phenomenologists do not try to establish what causes crime; instead they try to discover how certain events come to be defined as crimes and how certain people come to be defined as criminal. Phenomenologists therefore examine the way that police officers reach decisions about whether to arrest and charge suspects. In doing so, they hope to establish the meanings attached to the words 'crime' and 'criminal' by the police. The end product of phenomenological research is an understanding of the meanings employed by members of society in their everyday life.

Although there are differences between those who support social action and phenomenological views, they all agree that the positivist approach has produced a distorted picture of social life.

Peter Berger argues that society has often been viewed as a puppet theatre with its members portrayed as 'little puppets jumping about on the ends of their invisible strings, cheerfully acting out the parts that have been assigned to them' (Berger, 1966). Society instils values, norms and roles, and humans dutifully respond like Berger's puppets. However, interactionists and phenomenologists believe that humans do not react and respond passively to an external society. They see humans as actively creating their own meanings and their own society in interaction with each other. In this respect they have similarities with some of the postmodern approaches discussed earlier (see p. 16).

Sociology and values

The positivist approach assumes that a science of society is possible. It therefore follows that objective observation and analysis of social life are possible. An objective view is free from the values, moral judgements and ideology of the observer: it provides facts and explanatory frameworks which are uncoloured by the observer's feelings and opinions.

An increasing number of sociologists argue that a value-free science of society is not possible. They maintain that the values of sociologists directly influence every aspect of their research. They argue that the various theories of society are based, at least in part, on value judgements and ideological positions. They suggest that sociological perspectives are shaped more by historical circumstances than by objective views of the reality of social life.

Those who argue that an objective science of society is not possible maintain that sociology can never be free from ideology. The term ideology refers to a set of ideas which present only a partial view of reality. An ideological viewpoint also includes values. It involves not only a judgement about the way things are, but also about the way things ought to be. Thus ideology is a set of beliefs and values that provides a way of seeing and interpreting the world, which results in a partial view of reality. The term ideology is often used to suggest a distortion, a false picture of reality. However there is considerable doubt about whether reality and ideology can be separated. As Nigel Harris suggests, 'Our reality is the next man's ideology and vice versa' (Harris, 1971).

Ideology can be seen as a set of beliefs and values that express the interests of a particular social group. Marxists use the term in this way when they talk about the ideology of the ruling class. In this sense, ideology is a viewpoint that distorts reality and justifies and legitimates the position of a social group. Karl Mannheim (Mannheim, 1948) uses the term in a similar way. He states that ideology consists of the beliefs and values of a ruling group which 'obscures the real condition of society both to itself and others and thereby stabilizes it'. Mannheim distinguishes this form of ideology from what he calls utopian ideology. Rather than supporting the status quo – the way things are – utopian ideologies advocate a complete change in the structure of society. Mannheim argues that such ideologies are usually found in oppressed groups whose members want radical change. As their name suggests, utopian ideologies are based on a vision of an ideal society, a perfect social system. Mannheim refers to them as 'wish-images' for a future social order. Like the ideologies of ruling groups, he argues that utopian ideologies are a way of seeing the world which prevents true insight and obscures reality.

Mannheim's ideas will now be applied to two of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology: Marxism and functionalism. It has often been argued that Marxism is largely based on a utopian ideology, and functionalism on a ruling class ideology. Marxism contains a vision and a promise of a future ideal society – the communist utopia. In this society the means of production are communally owned and, as a result, oppression and exploitation disappear.

The communist utopia provides a standard of comparison for present and past societies. Since they inevitably fall far short of this ideal, their social arrangements will be condemned. It has been argued that the communist utopia is not a scientific prediction but merely a projection of the 'wish-images' of those who adopt a Marxist position. Utopian ideology has therefore been seen as the basis of Marxist theory.

By comparison, functionalism has often been interpreted as a form of ruling class ideology. Where Marxism is seen to advocate radical change, functionalism is seen to justify and legitimate the status quo. With its emphasis on order and stability, consensus and integration, functionalism appears to adopt a conservative stance. Rapid social change is not recommended since it will disrupt social order. The major institutions of society are justified by the belief that they are meeting the functional prerequisites of the social system. Although functionalists have introduced the concept of dysfunction to cover the harmful effects of parts of the system on society as a whole, the concept is rarely employed. In practice, functionalists appear preoccupied with discovering the positive functions and the beneficial effects of social institutions. As a result, the term function is associated with the idea of useful and good. This interpretation of society tends to legitimate the way things are. Ruling class ideology has therefore been seen as the basis of functionalist theory.

It is important to note that the above interpretation of the ideological bases of Marxism and functionalism is debatable. However, a case can be made to support the view that both perspectives are ideologically based.

The view that Marxism and functionalism are ideologically based would certainly be supported by postmodernists. Postmodernists do not just reject these particular perspectives – they reject any attempt to produce a theory of society as a whole. They see such theories as dangerous. This is because they can lead to one group trying to impose its will on others. From this viewpoint it is neither possible nor desirable to try to remove values from sociology. Instead, a range of different values should be accepted and tolerated. People have a right to be different from one another and to hold different views. It is not the job of the sociologist to arbitrate between these differences and say which is better.

Some sociologists reject this standpoint. Critical social scientists (whose ideas are examined in Chapter 14) do not deny that values must inevitably enter into sociology. However, they do not believe that sociologists should just accept the range of different values present in society. Rather, it is the duty of social scientists to try to improve society. If, like postmodernists, they were simply to accept the range of different values that exists, they would be shirking their responsibility. By refusing to make any judgement about whose values are better, they would be accepting the way society is. Taken to extremes, this would mean, for example, that the values of the rapist are no worse than those of the rape victim; the values of racists are no worse than those of people who campaign against racism; and the values of capitalists who exploit their workers are no worse than those of people who try to help the poor. Critical social scientists argue that sociologists should take sides and they should try to use their work to fight injustice and improve society.

This section has provided a brief introduction to the question of the relationship between sociology and values. The relationship will be considered in detail throughout the text. Each chapter in the main section of the book will conclude with an interpretation of the values involved in the views that are discussed.

The sociological imagination

Although sociologists vary in their perspectives, methods and values, they all (with the exception of some versions of postmodernism) share the aim of understanding and explaining the social world. Combining the insights offered by different approaches might be the best way of achieving this goal.

Structural theories of society, such as functionalism and Marxism, emphasize the importance of society in shaping human behaviour. On the other hand, approaches such as interactionism emphasize the importance of human behaviour in shaping society. Many sociologists today believe that good sociology must examine both the structure of society and social interaction. They believe that it is only by combining the study of the major changes in society and individual lives that sociologists can develop their understanding of social life.

This idea is not new. It was supported by the very influential German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) (see Chapter 15), and more recently has been examined in depth by the British sociologist

Anthony Giddens (see Chapter 15). However, perhaps the clearest exposition of this view was put forward by the American sociologist C. Wright Mills.

Mills called the ability to study the structure of society at the same time as individuals' lives the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959). Mills argued that the sociological imagination allowed people to understand their 'private troubles' in terms of 'public issues'. Unemployment, war and marital breakdown are all experienced by people in terms of the problems they produce in their personal lives. They react to them as individuals, and their reactions have consequences for society as a whole. However, to Mills, these issues can only be fully understood in the context of wider social forces. For example, very specific circumstances might lead to one person becoming unemployed, but when unemployment rates in society as a whole rise, it becomes a public issue that needs to be explained. The sociologist has to consider 'the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals'.

According to Mills, then, sociology should be about examining the biography of individuals in the context of the history of societies. The sociological imagination is not just of use to sociologists, it is important to all members of society if they wish to understand, change and improve their lives. Perhaps sociology can be seen as succeeding when it allows people to achieve this imagination, and the theories and studies examined in the rest of the book can be judged in these terms.