Chapter 15

Sociological theory

Introduction

A theory is a set of ideas that provides an explanation for something. A sociological theory is a set of ideas that provides an explanation for human society. Critics of sociology sometimes object to the emphasis that sociologists place on theory, and suggest it might be better to let 'the facts' speak for themselves. But there are no facts without theory. For example, in Western society, the generally accepted facts that the world is round and that it orbits the sun are inseparable from theories that explain the nature and movement of heavenly bodies. However, in some non-Western societies whose members employ different theories, the view that the world is flat and the solar system revolves around it is accepted as a statement of fact. Clearly the facts do not speak for themselves.

Like all theory, sociological theory is selective. No amount of theory can hope to explain everything, or account for the infinite amount of data that exist, or encompass the endless ways of viewing reality. Theories are therefore selective in terms of their priorities and perspectives and the data they define as significant. As a result, they provide a particular and partial view of reality.

There are a wide variety of sociological theories, and they can be grouped together according to various criteria. One of the most important of these is the distinction between structural perspectives and social action perspectives. This distinction will form the framework for the early parts of this chapter. However, there is also an important distinction between modern and postmodern perspectives in sociology. This distinction will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

Structural versus social action theories

Structural perspectives and social action perspectives differ in the way they approach the analysis of society. Structural, or macro, perspectives analyse the way society as a whole fits together. Thus, despite their differences, both functionalism and Marxism use a model of how society as a whole works. Many functionalists base their model of society around the assumption of functional prerequisites or basic needs, and go on to explain how different parts of society help to meet those needs. Marxists, on the other hand, see society as resting upon an economic base or infrastructure, with a superstructure rising above it. They see society as divided into social classes which have the potential to be in conflict with each other.

The main differences between functionalist and Marxist perspectives, then, concern the ways in which they characterize the social structure. Functionalists stress the extent to which the different elements of the social structure fit together harmoniously. Marxists stress the lack of fit between the different parts, particularly social classes, and so emphasize the potential for social conflict.

Marxism is one example of a conflict perspective. There are a variety of interpretations and adaptations of Marx's work, and some neo-Marxists question some of the concepts used by Marx, while accepting his overall approach. Other conflict theorists agree with Marx and neo-Marxists that there is conflict in society, but disagree about the causes and types of conflict. They draw upon the work of Max Weber, who argued that many groups, apart from classes, can be in conflict for the scarce resources in society (see pp. 36–9).

Not all sociological perspectives base their analysis upon an examination of the structure of society as a whole. Rather than seeing human behaviour as being largely determined by society, they see society as being the product of human activity. They stress the meaningfulness of human behaviour, denying that it is primarily determined by the structure of society.

These approaches are variously called social action approaches, interpretive sociology, or micro sociology. Max Weber was the first sociologist to advocate a social action approach (although he also uses elements of a structural approach in parts of his work). In contemporary sociology there are two main varieties of this type of sociology.

Symbolic interactionists try to explain human behaviour and human society by examining the ways in which people interpret the actions of others,

develop a self-concept or self-image, and act in terms of meanings. They do not deny the existence of some elements of a social structure: for example, they acknowledge the presence of social roles, and some interactionists also use the concept of social class. However, they believe that the social structure is fluid and constantly changing in response to interaction.

Ethnomethodology moves even further from a structural approach by denying the existence of a social structure as such. To ethnomethodologists, the social world consists of the definitions and categorizations of members of society. These subjective meanings are social reality. The job of the sociologist, in their view, is to interpret, describe and above all to understand this subjective reality.

It is not possible to provide clear dividing lines between sociological perspectives. There are many approaches that do not fit neatly even into such broad categories as structural or social action perspectives. For example, the description of Marx's social theories later in this section will show that elements of a social action approach can be found within his work; and Weber's work also uses elements of both types of perspective. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to divide much sociology into these two categories, because the emphasis within perspectives like functionalism and Marxism is so different from that found within interactionism and ethnomethodology.

Some sociologists have made a conscious attempt to bridge the apparent gulf between social action and structural perspectives. Max Weber was arguably the first sociologist to try to combine an analysis of the structures of society with analysis of individual social actions; more recently, the sociologist Paul Willis has tried to combine Marxist analysis with an interactionist approach to social action; and Anthony Giddens, another sociologist, has also tried to bridge the gap that seems to separate structural and social action approaches.

Some of the most recent approaches within sociology have not been particularly concerned with issues to do with the difference between structural and social action perspectives. Postmodernism in particular defies categorization in these terms. Much of the inspiration for postmodernism comes from the post-structuralist perspectives discussed in Chapter 12 (see pp. 913–16). Post-structuralism takes the analysis of language as its starting point, rather than the analysis of social structures or social action. However, most postmodernists tend to be hostile to structural perspectives that claim to be able to explain how society works. Postmodernists generally reject the claim that any single theory is able to explain the social world.

This brief summary cannot do justice to the subtleties and complexities of sociological theory. Some of these complexities will be examined later in this chapter, but it is important to note that the chapter is far from comprehensive. There are a number of other perspectives that have not been included. Furthermore, sociology is a developing discipline and sociological perspectives are continually being refined and developed in the light of theoretical debate and empirical investigation. Nevertheless, it is possible to outline the central features of the most influential perspectives in the discipline.

Functionalism

Functionalist analysis has a long history in sociology. It is prominent in the work of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), two of the founding fathers of the discipline. It was developed by Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) and refined by Talcott Parsons (1902–79). During the 1940s and 1950s functionalism was the dominant social theory in American sociology. Since that time it has steadily dropped from favour, partly because of damaging criticism, partly because other approaches are seen to answer certain questions more successfully, and partly because it simply went out of fashion.

Society as a system

Functionalism views society as a system: that is, as a set of interconnected parts which together form a whole. The basic unit of analysis is society, and its various parts are understood primarily in terms of their relationship to the whole. The early functionalists often drew an analogy between society and an organism such as the human body. They argued that an understanding of any organ in the body, such as the heart or lungs, involves an understanding of its relationship to other organs and, in particular, its contribution towards the maintenance of the organism. In the same way, an understanding of any part of society requires an analysis of its relationship to other parts and, most importantly, its contribution to the maintenance of society. Continuing this analogy, functionalists argued that, just as an organism has certain basic needs that must be satisfied if it is to survive, so society has basic needs that must be met if it is to continue to exist. Thus social institutions such as the family and religion are analysed as a part of the

social system rather than as isolated units. In particular, they are understood with reference to the contribution they make to the system as a whole.

Functional prerequisites

These basic needs or necessary conditions of existence are sometimes known as the functional prerequisites of society. Various approaches have been used to identify functional prerequisites. Some sociologists have examined a range of societies in an attempt to discover what factors they have in common. For example, Davis and Moore (1967) claimed that all societies have some form of social stratification, and George Peter Murdock (1949) maintained that the family exists in every known human society. From these observations it is assumed that institutional arrangements, such as social stratification and the family, meet needs that are common to all societies. Thus, from the universal presence of social stratification, it is argued that all societies require some mechanism to ensure that social positions are adequately filled by motivated persons. From the universality of the family, it is assumed that some mechanism for the reproduction and socialization of new members is a functional prerequisite of society.

However, the problem with this approach is its assumption that the presence of the same institution in every society indicates that it meets the same need. Simply because a form of stratification exists in all societies does not necessarily mean that it reflects 'the universal necessity which calls forth stratification in any social system', as Davis and Moore claim. Put another way, it cannot be assumed that stratification systems perform the same function in all societies. (Davis and Moore's theory of stratification is outlined in Chapter 2, pp. 27–8.)

An alternative approach to the identification of functional prerequisites involves an analysis of those factors that would lead to the breakdown or termination of society. Thus Marion J. Levy (1952) argued that a society would cease to exist if its members became extinct, if they became totally apathetic, if they were involved in a war of all against all, or if they were absorbed into another society. Therefore, in order for a society to survive, it must have some means of preventing these events from occurring. These means are the functional prerequisites of society.

For example, to ensure that members of society do not become extinct, a system for reproducing new members and maintaining the health of existing members is essential. This involves role differentiation and role assignment. Individuals must be assigned to produce food and to reproduce and care for new members of society. In order for these essential services to be maintained, individuals must be sufficiently motivated to perform their roles. If they were totally apathetic, the social system would collapse through lack of effort. A system of goals and rewards is necessary to motivate members of society to want to do what they have to do in order to maintain the system. By specifying the factors that would lead to the termination of society, Levy claimed to have identified the basic requirements that must be met if society is to survive.

The problem with this approach to the specification of functional prerequisites is its reliance on common sense and ingenuity. In the case of a biological organism it is possible to identify basic needs, since it can be shown that if these needs are not met, the organism dies. However, societies change rather than die. As a result, it is not possible to identify unequivocally those aspects of a social system that are indispensable to its existence. Functionalists using Levy's approach have drawn up lists of functional prerequisites that are often similar in content but never quite the same.

A related approach involves the deduction of functional prerequisites from an abstract model of the social system. For example, if society is viewed as a system, certain survival needs can be deduced from an abstract model of the system. Any system is made up of interconnected parts. If a system is to survive, there must be a minimum amount of integration between its parts. There must be some degree of fit, which requires an element of mutual compatibility of the parts. From this type of analysis, the functional prerequisites of society may be inferred. Thus any social system requires a minimum amount of integration between its parts.

From this assumption, functional analysis turns to an examination of the parts of society, to investigate how they contribute to the integration of the social system. In this respect, religion has often been seen as a powerful mechanism for social integration. Religion is seen to reinforce the basic values of society. Social norms, which derive from these values, structure and direct behaviour in the various institutions of society. The parts of the social system are integrated in that they are largely infused with the same basic values. Were the various institutions founded on conflicting values, the system would tend to disintegrate. Since religion promotes and reinforces social values, it can be seen as an integrating mechanism. But the problem with deducing functional prerequisites such as integration from an abstract model of the social system is that they are inferred rather than unequivocally identified.

The concept of function

The concept of 'function' in functionalist analysis refers to the contribution of the part to the whole. More specifically, the function of any part of society

is the contribution it makes to meeting the functional prerequisites of the social system. Parts of society are functional in so far as they maintain the system and contribute to its survival. Thus a function of the family is to ensure the continuity of society by reproducing and socializing new members. A function of religion is to integrate the social system by reinforcing common values.

Functionalists also employ the concept of 'dysfunction' to refer to the effects of any social institution which detract from the maintenance of society. However, in practice, they have been primarily concerned with the search for functions, and relatively little use has been made of the concept of dysfunction.

The ideology of functionalism

Functionalist analysis has focused on the question of how social systems are maintained. This focus has tended to result in a positive evaluation of the parts of society. With their concern for investigating how functional prerequisites are met, functionalists have concentrated on functions rather than dysfunctions. This emphasis has resulted in many institutions being seen as beneficial and useful to society. Indeed some institutions, such as the family, religion and social stratification, have been seen as not only beneficial but indispensable. This view has led critics to argue that functionalism has a built-in conservative bias which supports the status quo. The argument that certain social arrangements are beneficial or indispensable provides support for their retention, and a reason to reject proposals for radical change. Responses to this criticism will be examined in a later section (see pp. 1039–40). (For various views on the ideological basis of functionalism, see the concluding sections of Chapters 2 to 12.)

This section has presented a brief outline of some of the main features of functionalist analysis. The sections that follow will consider the views of some of the major functionalist theorists.

Emile Durkheim

Social facts as constraints

Critics of functionalism have often argued that it pictures the individual as having little or no control over his or her own actions. Rather than constructing their own social world, members of society appear to be directed by the system. For example, they are organized into families and systems of stratification because society requires these social arrangements in order to survive. Many have questioned the logic of treating society as if it were something separate from its members, as if it shaped their actions rather than being constructed by them.

Durkheim (1938, first published 1894) rejected such views. He argued that society has a reality of its own over and above the individuals who comprise it. Members of society are constrained by 'social facts', by 'ways of acting, thinking and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him'. Beliefs and moral codes are passed on from one generation to the next and shared by the individuals who make up a society. From this point of view it is not the consciousness of the individual that directs behaviour, but common beliefs and sentiments that transcend the individual and shape his or her consciousness. Having established to his own satisfaction that social facts can, at least for purposes of analysis, be treated separately from social actors, Durkheim is free to treat society as a system which obeys its own laws. He is now in a position to 'seek the explanation of social life in the nature of society itself'.

The causes and functions of social facts

Durkheim argues that there are two ways of explaining social facts. In both cases the explanation lies in society. The first method involves determining the cause of a social fact, seeking to explain its origin. In Durkheim's view, 'The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of individual consciousness.' As was discussed in Chapter 14 (see pp. 974–81), the causes of variations in suicide rates are to be found in social facts, in society rather than in the individual (Durkheim, 1970, first published 1897). However, the explanation of a social fact also involves an analysis of its function in society, of its contribution to 'the general needs of the social organism', of its 'function in the establishment of social order'. Durkheim assumes that the explanation for the continuing existence of a social fact lies in its function, that is, in its usefulness for society.

Durkheim is at pains to point out the distinction between cause and function. Thus the cause of the Christian religion lies in the specific circumstances of its origin among a group of Jews under Roman rule. Yet its functions – the reasons for its retention over a period of nearly 2,000 years – require a different form of explanation. Durkheim argues that 'if the usefulness of a fact is not the cause of its existence, it is generally necessary that it be useful in order that it might maintain itself'. Social facts therefore continue in existence because they contribute in some way to the maintenance of society, because they serve 'some social end'.

Social order and human nature

Much of Durkheim's work is concerned with functional analysis, with seeking to understand the

functions of social facts. He assumes that society has certain functional prerequisites, the most important of which is the need for social order. This is necessary because of human nature. Durkheim has a 'homo duplex' model of human nature: that is, he believes that humans have two sides to their nature. One side is selfish or egotistical. Humans are partly driven by selfish biological needs, such as the need to satisfy hunger. Inevitably this means that they tend to look after their own interests, which makes it difficult for individuals to be integrated into society. However, there is another side to human nature: the ability to believe in moral values. Society has to make use of this side of human nature if social life is to be possible. But how is social life to be achieved? This question still needs to be answered.

The collective conscience and social stability

Durkheim sees the answer in consensus, in a 'collective conscience' consisting of common beliefs and sentiments. Without this consensus or agreement on fundamental moral issues, social solidarity would be impossible and individuals could not be bound together to form an integrated social unit. Without social obligations backed by moral force, the cooperation and reciprocity that social life requires would be absent. If narrow self-interest rather than mutual obligation were the guiding force, conflict and disorder would result. In Durkheim's words, 'For where interest is the only ruling force each individual finds himself in a state of war with every other.' The collective conscience constrains individuals to act in terms of the requirements of society. Since the collective conscience is a social fact and therefore external to the individual, it is essential that it be impressed upon him or her. Thus Durkheim argues that, 'society has to be present in the individual'.

Durkheim's functionalism is set in the framework of the above argument. It may be illustrated by his analysis of the functions of religion (Durkheim, 1961, first published 1912).

Threats to social solidarity

Durkheim was aware of the possibility that societies might not function smoothly. This is evident in his work on the division of labour (Durkheim, 1947, first published 1893) (see pp. 691–3), which suggests that industrial societies based on organic solidarity might break down. They could be undermined if egoism or anomie started to reduce the control that society had over the individual. Although Durkheim saw the possibility of conflict within industrial society, he believed that it could be kept within manageable limits through the existence of professional associations, the teaching of moral values in the education system, and through society functioning in a way that treated all its members fairly.

Talcott Parsons

The problem of social order

The name of Talcott Parsons is synonymous with functionalism. Over a period of some 50 years, Parsons published numerous articles and books, and during the 1940s and 1950s he became the dominant theorist in American sociology. This section will briefly examine aspects of his work.

Like Durkheim, Parsons (1951) began with the question of how social order is possible. He observed that social life is characterized by 'mutual advantage and peaceful cooperation rather than mutual hostility and destruction'. A large part of Parsons's sociology is concerned with explaining how this state of affairs is accomplished. He started with a consideration of the views of the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who claimed to have discovered the basis of social order.

According to Hobbes, humanity is directed by passion and reason. Its passions are the primary driving force, reason being employed to devise ways and means of providing for their satisfaction. If people's passions were allowed free rein, they would use any means at their disposal, including force and fraud, to satisfy them. The net result would be 'the war of all against all'. However, fear of this outcome is generated by the most basic of human passions, that of self-preservation. Guided by the desire for self-preservation, people agree to restrain their passions, give up their liberty and enter into a social contract with their fellows. They submit to the authority of a ruler or governing body in return for protection against the aggression, force and fraud of others. Only because of this sovereign power is the war of all against all prevented, and security and order established in society.

Hobbes presented a picture of humans as rational, self-interested and calculating. They form an ordered society with their fellows through fear of the consequences if they do not. This is very different from Durkheim's view of people acting in response to moral commitments and obeying social rules because they believe them to be right.

Parsons shared Durkheim's views. He argued that Hobbes's picture of people pursuing personal ends, restrained only by sovereign power, fails to provide an adequate explanation for social order. Parsons believed that only a commitment to common values provides a basis for order in society.

Parsons illustrated this point by reference to social relationships, which at first sight would appear to exemplify Hobbes's view of people as self-interested

and calculating. He examined transactions in the market place. In a business transaction, the parties concerned form a contract. In order for the conduct of business to be orderly, it is essential that contracts be bound by a 'system of regulatory, normative rules'. In Parsons's view, fear of the consequences is insufficient to motivate people to obey the rules. A moral commitment is essential. Thus, rules governing business transactions must ultimately derive from shared values which state what is just, right and proper. Order in the economic system is therefore based on a general agreement concerning business morality. From this agreement stem rules which define a contract as valid or invalid. For example, a contract obtained by force or fraud is not binding. Parsons argued that the world of business, like any other part of society, is, by necessity, a moral world.

Value consensus

Value consensus forms the fundamental integrating principle in society. If members of society are committed to the same values, they will tend to share a common identity, which provides a basis for unity and cooperation. From shared values derive common goals. Values provide a general conception of what is desirable and worthwhile. Goals provide direction in specific situations. For example, in Western society, members of a particular workforce will share the goal of efficient production in their factory – a goal which stems from the general view of economic productivity. A common goal provides an incentive for cooperation.

Roles provide the means whereby values and goals are translated into action. A social institution consists of a combination of roles. For instance, a business firm is made up of a number of specialized roles that combine to further the goals of the organization. The content of roles is structured in terms of norms, which define the rights and obligations applicable to each particular role. Norms can be seen as specific expressions of values. Thus the norms that structure the roles of manager, accountant, engineer and shop-floor worker owe their content partly to the value of economic productivity. Norms tend to ensure that role behaviour is standardized, predictable and therefore orderly. This means that from the most general level – the central value system – to the most specific – normative conduct – the social system is infused with common values. This provides the basis for social order.

Social equilibrium

The importance Parsons placed on value consensus led him to state that the main task of sociology is to analyse the 'institutionalization of patterns of value orientation in the social system'. When values are institutionalized and behaviour is structured in terms of them, the result is a stable system. A state of 'social equilibrium' is attained, the various parts of the system being in a state of balance. There are two main ways in which social equilibrium is maintained. The first involves socialization, by means of which society's values are transmitted from one generation to the next and internalized to form an integral part of individual personalities. In Western society, the family and the education system are the major institutions concerned with this function. (See Chapter 11, pp. 779–80, for Parsons's views on the functions of education, and Chapter 8, pp. 509–10, for his views on the functions of the family.)

Social equilibrium is also maintained by the various mechanisms of social control which discourage deviance and so maintain order in the system. The processes of socialization and social control are fundamental to the equilibrium of the social system and therefore to order in society.

Functional prerequisites

Parsons viewed society as a system. He argued that any social system has four basic functional prerequisites – adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance. These can be seen as problems that society must solve if it is to survive. The function of any part of the social system is understood as its contribution to meeting the functional prerequisites. Solutions to the four survival problems must be institutionalized if society is to continue in existence. In other words, solutions must be organized in the form of ordered, stable social institutions which persist through time.

The first functional prerequisite, adaptation, refers to the relationship between the system and its environment. In order to survive, social systems must have some degree of control over their environment. At a minimum, food and shelter must be provided to meet the physical needs of members. The economy is the institution primarily concerned with this function.

Goal attainment refers to the need for all societies to set goals towards which social activity is directed. Procedures for establishing goals and deciding on priorities between goals are institutionalized in the form of political systems. Governments not only set goals but allocate resources to achieve them. Even in a so-called free enterprise system, the economy is regulated and directed by laws passed by governments.

Integration refers primarily to the 'adjustment of conflict'. It is concerned with the coordination and mutual adjustment of the parts of the social system. The law is the main institution that meets this need. Legal norms define and standardize relations between individuals and between institutions, and so reduce the potential for conflict. When conflict does arise, it

is settled by the judicial system and does not therefore lead to the disintegration of the social system.

Pattern maintenance refers to 'the maintenance of the basic pattern of values, institutionalized in the society'. Institutions that perform this function include the family, the educational system and religion. In Parsons's view, 'the values of society are rooted in religion'. Religious beliefs provide the ultimate justification for the values of the social system. (See Chapter 7, pp. 434–5, for Parsons's analysis of the functions of religion.)

Parsons maintained that any social system can be analysed in terms of the functional prerequisites he identified. Thus, all parts of society can be understood with reference to the functions they perform in the adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance systems.

Social change

Functionalism has often been criticized for failing to provide an adequate explanation for social change. If the system is in equilibrium, with its various parts contributing towards order and stability, it is difficult to see how it changes. Parsons approached this problem by arguing that, in practice, no social system is in a perfect state of equilibrium, although a certain degree of equilibrium is essential for the survival of societies. The process of social change can therefore be pictured as a 'moving equilibrium'.

This may be illustrated in the following way. The adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance systems are inter-related; a change in one will therefore produce responses in the others. For example, a change in the adaptation system will result in a disturbance in the social system as a whole. The other parts of the system will operate to return it to a state of equilibrium. In Parsons's words, 'Once a disturbance has been introduced into an equilibrated system there will tend to be a reaction to this disturbance, which tends to restore the system to equilibrium.' This reaction will lead to some degree of change, however small, in the system as a whole. Although social systems never attain complete equilibrium, they tend towards this state. Social change can therefore be seen as a 'moving equilibrium'.

Social evolution and pattern variables

Parsons viewed social change as a process of 'social evolution' from simple to more complex forms of society. He regarded changes in adaptation as a major driving force of social evolution. The history of human society from the simple hunting and gathering band to the complex nation-state represents an increase in the 'general adaptive capacity' of society. As societies evolve into more complex forms, control over the environment increases. While economic changes might provide an initial stimulus, Parsons believed that, in the long run, cultural changes – that is, changes in values – determine the '*broadest* patterns of change'. For example, he argued that the structure of modern societies owes much to values inherited from ancient Israel and classical Greece.

Parsons identified two sets of cultural values, which he called pattern variables A and B. These pattern variables consist of the ways that society answers basic questions such as: 'How should rewards be allocated to individuals?' and 'Should members of society look after their own interests or those of the social groups to which they belong?'

The two sets of pattern variables are summarized in Table 15.1.

Table 15.1 Talcott Parsons's concept of pattern variables

Pattern variables A	Pattern variables B
Ascription Status is ascribed; it is determined by the type of family into which a person is born.	**Achievement** Status is achieved through a person's own efforts: for example, through hard work.
Diffuseness People enter into relationships with others to satisfy a large range of needs: for example, the relationship between mother and child.	**Specificity** People enter into relationships with others to satisfy particular needs: for example, the relationship between a customer and shopkeeper.
Particularism Individuals act differently towards particular people: for example, they are loyal to their family but not to strangers.	**Universalism** Individuals act according to universal principles: for example, everyone is equal before the law, so a policewoman would arrest her husband if necessary.
Affectivity Gratification is immediate. People act to gratify their desires as soon as possible.	**Effective neutrality** Gratification is deferred: for example, saving money to put a deposit on a house in the future.
Collective orientation People put the interests of the social groups to which they belong before their own interests.	**Self-orientation** People pursue their own interests first, rather than those of the social group to which they belong.

According to Parsons, with the exception of family life, pattern variables A are typical of simple societies; pattern variables B are typical of advanced industrial societies. Social change therefore requires a movement towards the adoption of pattern variables B. If a society fails to do this it will stagnate, for pattern variables A stop a society from developing. For example, in the traditional Hindu caste system a person's role in society was ascribed at birth. This prevented the most able individuals from filling the most important social roles. The caste system therefore meant that society was not run efficiently and social progress was held back. Parsons accepted that pattern variables A will not disappear completely even in the most advanced societies. They are retained within the family, because they provide the emotional security that is necessary for the successful socialization of children (see pp. 509–10).

Social differentiation

Social evolution involves a process of social differentiation. The institutions and roles that form the social system become increasingly differentiated and specialized in terms of their function. Thus, religious institutions become separated from the state, and the family and the economy become increasingly differentiated, each specializing in fewer functions. This produces a problem of integration. As parts of society become more and more specialized and distinct, it becomes increasingly difficult to integrate them in terms of common values. This problem is solved by the generalizing of values – a process discussed in Chapter 7 with reference to religion (pp. 481–2).

Values become more general and diffuse, less specific and particular. In Western society, for example, the highly generalized values of universalism and achievement can be applied to all members of society despite the wide variation in their roles. Universal standards of achievement are generally accepted and provide the basis for differential reward and role allocation. Thus, despite increasing social differentiation, social integration and order are maintained by the generalizing of values.

Parsons admitted that his views on social evolution represented little more than a beginning. However, they do offer a possible solution to the problem of explaining social change from a functionalist perspective.

Robert K. Merton

In a closely reasoned essay, originally published in 1949, the American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1968) attempted to refine and develop functionalist analysis. He singled out three related assumptions that have been employed by many functionalists and questioned their utility.

The problem of functional unity

The first assumption he termed the 'postulate of the functional unity of society'. This assumption states that any part of the social system is functional for the entire system. All parts of society are seen to work together for the maintenance and integration of society as a whole. Merton argued that, particularly in complex, highly differentiated societies, this functional unity is doubtful. He provided the example of religious pluralism to illustrate this point. In a society with a variety of faiths, religion may tend to divide rather than unite.

Merton argued that functional unity is a matter of degree. Its extent must be determined by investigation rather than simply beginning with the assumption that it exists. The idea of functional unity implies that a change in one part of the system will automatically result in a change in other parts. Again Merton argued that this is a matter for investigation. It should not simply be assumed at the outset. He suggested that, in highly differentiated societies, institutions may well have a high degree of 'functional autonomy'. Thus a change in a particular institution may have little or no effect on others.

Functions, dysfunctions and non-functions

Merton referred to the second assumption as the 'postulate of universal functionalism'. This assumption states that 'all standardized social or cultural forms have positive functions'. Merton argued that the assumption that every aspect of the social system performs a positive function is not only premature, it may well be incorrect. He suggested that functionalist analysis should proceed from the assumption that any part of society may be functional, dysfunctional or non-functional. In addition, the units for which a particular part is functional, dysfunctional or non-functional must be clearly specified. These units may be individuals, groups or society as a whole. Thus, poverty may be seen as dysfunctional for the poor but functional for the non-poor and for society as a whole. Merton suggested that the postulate of universal functionalism should be replaced by 'the provisional assumption that persisting cultural forms have a *net balance of functional consequences* either for the society considered as a unit or for subgroups sufficiently powerful to retain these forms intact, by means of direct coercion or indirect persuasion'.

The problem of indispensability

Merton's third criticism was directed towards the 'postulate of indispensability'. This assumption states that certain institutions or social arrangements are

indispensable to society. Functionalists have often seen religion in this light. For example, Davis and Moore (1967) claim that religion 'plays a unique and indispensable part in society'. Merton questioned the assumption of indispensability, arguing that the same functional prerequisites may be met by a range of alternative institutions. Thus there is no justification for assuming that institutions such as the family, religion and social stratification are a necessary part of all human societies.

To replace the idea of indispensability, Merton suggested the concept of 'functional equivalents' or 'functional alternatives'. From this point of view, a political ideology such as communism can provide a functional alternative to religion. It can meet the same functional prerequisites as religion. However, Merton was still left with the problem of actually identifying functional prerequisites.

Merton argued that the postulates of the functional unity of society, universal functionalism and indispensability are little more than articles of faith. They are matters for investigation and should not form prior assumptions. Merton claimed that his framework for functionalist analysis removed the charge that functionalism is ideologically based. He argued that the parts of society should be analysed in terms of their 'effects' or 'consequences' on society as a whole and on individuals and groups within society. Since these effects can be functional, dysfunctional or non-functional, Merton claimed that the value judgement present in the assumption that all parts of the system are functional was therefore removed.

Functionalism – a critique

Teleology

Functionalism has been subjected to considerable criticism. Part of this criticism is directed at the logic of functionalist enquiry. In particular, it is argued that the type of explanation employed is teleological. A teleological explanation states that the parts of a system exist because of their beneficial consequences for the system as a whole. The main objection to this type of reasoning is that it treats an effect as a cause. Thus Davis and Moore's theory of stratification outlines the positive effects or functions of social stratification and then proceeds to argue that these effects explain its origin (Davis and Moore, 1967). But an effect cannot explain a cause since causes must always precede effects. Therefore, the effects of stratification cannot occur until a system of social stratification has already been established. It may be argued that members of society unconsciously respond to social needs, and so create the institutions necessary for the maintenance of society. However, there is no evidence of the existence of such unconscious motivations.

Assessing effects

Functionalism is on stronger logical ground when it argues that the continued existence of an institution may be explained in terms of its effects. Thus, once an institution has originated, it continues to exist if, on balance, it has beneficial effects on the system. But there are problems with this type of explanation. It is extremely difficult to establish that the net effect of any institution is beneficial to society. A knowledge of all its effects would be required in order to weigh the balance of functions and dysfunctions. As the debate on the functional merits and demerits of stratification indicates, there is little evidence that such knowledge is forthcoming (see Chapter 2, pp. 26–9).

The problems involved in assessing the effects of a social institution may be illustrated in terms of the analogy between society and a physical organism. Biologists are able to show that certain parts of an organism make positive contributions to its maintenance, since, if those parts stopped functioning, life would cease. Since societies change rather than die, sociologists are unable to apply similar criteria. In addition, standards exist in biology for assessing the health of an organism. In terms of these standards, the contribution of the various parts can be judged. There are no comparable standards for assessing the 'health' of a society. For these reasons there are problems with the argument that a social institution continues to exist because, on balance, its effects are beneficial to society.

Value consensus and social order

Functionalists such as Parsons who see the solution to the problem of social order in terms of value consensus, have been strongly criticized. First, their critics argue that consensus is assumed rather than shown to exist. Research has failed to reveal unequivocally a widespread commitment to the various sets of values that are seen to characterize Western society.

Second, the stability of society may owe more to the absence, rather than the presence, of value consensus. For example, a lack of commitment to the value of achievement by those at the bottom of stratification systems may serve to stabilize society. Thus Michael Mann argues that, in a society where members compete for unequal rewards, 'cohesion results precisely because there is no common commitment to core values' (quoted in Mennell, 1974). If all members of society were strongly committed to the value of achievement, the failure in terms of this value of those at the base of the stratification system might well produce disorder.

Third, consensus in and of itself will not necessarily result in social order. In fact it may

produce the opposite result. As Pierre van den Berghe notes, 'consensus on norms such as extreme competition and individualistic *laissez-faire*, or suspicion and treachery ... or malevolence and resort to witchcraft is hardly conducive to social solidarity and integration' (quoted in Mennell, 1974). Therefore, the content of values rather than value consensus as such can be seen as the crucial factor with respect to social order.

Determinism

Functionalism has been criticized for what many see as its deterministic view of human action. Its critics have argued that, in terms of functionalist theory, human behaviour is portrayed as determined by the system. In particular, the social system has needs, and the behaviour of its members is shaped to meet these needs. Rather than creating the social world in which they live, people are seen as creations of the system. Thus David Walsh argues that Parsons treats human action 'as determined by the characteristics of the system per se' (Walsh, 1972). By means of socialization, humanity is programmed in terms of the norms and values of the social system; it is kept on the straight and narrow by mechanisms of social control that exist to fulfil the requirements of the system; its actions are structured in terms of social roles that are designed to meet the functional prerequisites of society. Humanity is pictured as an automaton, programmed, directed and controlled by the system.

Walsh rejects this view of humanity. Arguing from a phenomenological perspective he claims that humanity actively constructs its own social world rather than being shaped by a social system that is somehow external to its being. Walsh maintains that the concept of a social system represents a 'reification' of the social world. Functionalists have converted social reality into a natural system external to social actors. In doing so, they have translated the social world into something that it is not. They have tended to portray the social system as the active agent, whereas, in reality, only human beings act.

Coercion and conflict

Critics of functionalism have argued that it tends to ignore coercion and conflict. For example, Alvin Gouldner states, 'While stressing the importance of the ends and values that men pursue, Parsons never asks *whose* ends and values these are. Are they pursuing their own ends or those imposed upon them by others?' (Gouldner, 1971). Few functionalists give serious consideration to the possibility that some groups in society, acting in terms of their own particular interests, dominate others. From this point of view, social order is imposed by the powerful, and value consensus is merely a legitimation of the position of the dominant group.

In his criticism of one of Parsons's major works, *The Social System*, David Lockwood argues that Parsons's approach is 'highly selective in its focus on the role of the normative order in the stabilization of social systems' (Lockwood, 1970). In focusing on the contribution of norms and values to social order, Parsons largely fails to recognize the conflicts of interest that tend to produce instability and disorder. Lockwood argues that, since all social systems involve competition for scarce resources, conflicts of interest are built into society. Conflict is not simply a minor strain in the system which is contained by value consensus. Instead it is a central and integral part of the system itself.

Functionalism reconsidered

Despite the widespread criticism of functionalism, it should not be rejected out of hand. Durkheim's work, for example, has provided insights that have helped modern sociologists to understand contemporary societies. Jonathon H. Turner and Alexandra Maryanski (1979) argue that, although functionalism has many flaws, it remains useful. Many of its basic assumptions still guide much sociological research: for example, the assumption that society should be seen as an integral whole; that its parts are interdependent; that social institutions exist and they do have effects; and that society is structured and the social structure directs human behaviour.

Conflict perspectives

There are many varieties of conflict perspectives within sociology. This section will deal with some of the more influential ones. Despite their differences, all have a model of society as a whole, and all adopt a structural approach. Furthermore, all conflict perspectives use, in one form or another, the notion that there are groups in society that have different interests. In this respect they believe that social arrangements will tend to benefit some groups at the expense of others. Because of the existence of different interests, the potential for, and likelihood of, conflict is always present. Different groups pursuing their separate interests are likely to clash and produce some degree of instability in society.

Conflict theorists tend to agree that the existence of groups with different interests does not mean that they will be in conflict all the time. There may be periods of truce, or it may be that some social groups are persuaded that their interests are not different from those of other groups. Nevertheless, periods of harmony do not last for ever, and eventually conflict will return.

Conflict theories differ from functionalism in stressing the existence of competing groups, while functionalists stress cooperation between social groups. (Most functionalists believe that all members of society share the same interests and that there is a consensus over society's values.)

Conflict theories also differ from each other in important respects. Some theories stress conflict between particular social groups. For example, most forms of feminism see conflict between men and women as the central feature of society. (Feminism was discussed in detail in Chapter 3.) The racism approach to explaining ethnic disadvantage focuses on conflict between ethnic groups (see pp. 237–49).

Many conflict theories take their inspiration from the work of Karl Marx or Max Weber. Marxist and Weberian conflict theories tend to disagree over the precise basis on which society is divided into different groups, and the exact nature of the conflict that results from these divisions.

Marxism

This section will focus on certain major themes in the work of Karl Marx (1818–83). Marx's views on various aspects of society have been examined in other chapters of the book. This section will seek to combine them into an overall perspective (see particularly Marx and Engels, 1950a, 1950b, Marx, 1974, Bottomore and Rubel (eds), 1963).

The volume of Marx's writings over a period of about 40 years was enormous. Many of his major projects remained unfinished, and part of the material published after his death was drawn from rough notes outlining future projects. Marx's writings contain inconsistencies, ambiguities and changes in emphasis. For these reasons there are many and varied interpretations of his work. This section, therefore, represents a particular interpretation of his ideas.

The historical perspective

Marx regarded people as both the producers and the products of society. They make society and themselves by their own actions. History is therefore the process of human self-creation. Yet people are also a product of society: they are shaped by the social relationships and systems of thought that they create. An understanding of society therefore involves a historical perspective which examines the process whereby humanity both produces, and is produced by, social reality.

A society forms a totality and can only be understood as such. The various parts of society are interconnected and influence each other. Thus, economic, political, legal and religious institutions can only be understood in terms of their mutual effect. Economic factors, however, exert the primary influence and largely shape other aspects of society.

The history of human society is a process of tension and conflict. Social change is not a smooth, orderly progression which gradually unfolds in harmonious evolution. Instead it proceeds from contradictions built into society, which are a source of tension and ultimately the source of open conflict and radical change.

Dialectical materialism

It is often argued that Marx's view of history is based on the idea of the dialectic. Dialectical movement represents a struggle of opposites, a conflict of contradictions. Conflict provides the dynamic principle, the source of change. From this viewpoint, any process of change involves tension between incompatible forces. The struggle between incompatible forces grows in intensity until there is a final collision. The result is a sudden leap forward, which creates a new set of forces on a higher level of development. The dialectical process then begins again, as the contradictions between this new set of forces interact and conflict, and propel change.

The idea of dialectical change was developed by the German philosopher Hegel. Hegel applied it to the history of human society, and in particular to the realm of ideas. He saw historical change as a dialectical movement of human ideas and thoughts. Hegel believed that society is essentially an expression of these thoughts. Thus, in terms of the dialectic, conflict between incompatible ideas produces new concepts that provide the basis for social change.

Marx rejected the priority Hegel gave to thoughts and ideas. He argued that the source of change lies in contradictions – in the economic system in particular, and in society in general. As a result of the priority he gives to economic factors – to 'material life' –

Marx's view of history is often referred to as dialectical materialism. Since people's ideas are primarily a reflection of the social relationships of economic production, they do not provide the main source of change. It is in contradictions and conflict in the economic system that the major dynamic for social change lies. Since all parts of society are interconnected, however, it is only through a process of interplay between these parts that change occurs.

The material basis of social life

History begins when humans actually produce their means of subsistence, when they begin to control nature. At a minimum this involves the production of food and shelter. Marx argued that, 'The first historical act is, therefore, the production of material life.' Production is a social enterprise since it requires cooperation. People must work together to produce the goods and services necessary for life. From the social relationships involved in production develops a 'mode of life' which can be seen as an expression of these relationships. This mode of life shapes human nature. In Marx's words, 'As individuals express their life so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, with what they produce and how they produce it.' Thus the nature of humanity, and the nature of society as a whole, derive primarily from the production of material life.

The emergence of contradictions

The major contradictions that propel change are found in the economic infrastructure of society. At the dawn of human history, when humans supposedly lived in a state of primitive communism, those contradictions did not exist. The means of production and the products of labour were communally owned. Since each member of society produced both for themselves and for society as a whole, there were no conflicts of interest between individuals and groups.

However, with the emergence of private property and, in particular, private ownership of the means of production, the fundamental contradiction of human society was created. Through its ownership of the means of production, a minority is able to control, command and enjoy the fruits of the labour of the majority. Since one group gains at the expense of the other, a conflict of interest exists between the minority who owns the means of production and the majority who perform productive labour. The tension and conflict generated by this contradiction are the major dynamic of social change.

For long periods of history, people are largely unaware of the contradictions that beset their societies. This is because their consciousness – their view of reality – is largely shaped by the social relationships involved in the process of production. Marx maintained that 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness.'

The primary aspect of an individual's social being is the social relationships they enter into for the production of material life. Since these relationships are largely reproduced in terms of ideas, concepts, laws and religious beliefs, they are seen as normal and natural. Thus, when the law legitimizes the rights of private property, when religious beliefs justify economic arrangements, and the dominant concepts of the age define them as natural and inevitable, members of society will be largely unaware of the contradictions they contain. In this way the contradictions within the economic infrastructure are compounded by the contradiction between human consciousness and objective reality. This consciousness is false. It presents a distorted picture of reality since it fails to reveal the basic conflicts of interest that exist in the world that humanity has created.

For long periods of time, humanity is, at most, vaguely aware of these contradictions; yet even a vague awareness produces tension. This tension will ultimately find full expression and be resolved in the process of dialectical change.

Alienation

The course of human history involves a progressive development of the means of production – a steady increase in human control over nature. This is paralleled by a corresponding increase in human alienation, an increase that reaches its height in capitalist society. Alienation is a situation in which the creations of humanity appear to humans as alien objects. Such creations are seen as independent from their creators and invested with the power to control them. People create their own society but will remain alienated until they recognize themselves within their own creation. Until that time humans will assign an independent existence to objects, ideas and institutions and be controlled by them. In the process they lose themselves, become strangers in the world they created: they become alienated.

Religion provides an example of human alienation. In Marx's view, 'Man makes religion, religion does not make man.' However, members of society fail to recognize that religion is of their own making. They assign to the gods an independent power, a power to direct their actions and shape their destiny. The more people invest in religion, the more they lose themselves. In Marx's words, 'The more man puts into God, the less he retains of himself.' In assigning their own powers to supernatural beings, people become alienated from themselves. Religion appears as an external force controlling human

destiny, whereas, in reality, it is human-made. Religion, though, is a reflection of a more fundamental source of alienation. It is essentially a projection of the social relationships involved in the process of production. If people are to find themselves and abolish illusions of religion, they must 'abandon a condition which requires illusions'. Humanity must therefore eradicate the source of alienation in the economic infrastructure. (Marxist views on religion are examined in Chapter 7, pp. 436–9.)

In Marx's view, productive labour is the primary, most vital human activity. In the production of objects, people 'objectify' themselves; they express and externalize their being; then they lose themselves in the object. The act of production then results in human alienation. This occurs when people regard the products of their labour as commodities, as articles for sale in the market place. The objects of their creation are then seen to control their existence. They are seen to be subject to impersonal forces, such as the law of supply and demand, over which they have little or no control. In Marx's words, 'the object that labour produces, its product, confronts it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer'. In this way people are estranged from the objects they produce; they become alienated from the most vital human activity – productive labour.

Alienation and capitalism

Alienation reaches its height in capitalist society where labour is dominated by the requirements of capital, the most important of which is the demand for profit. These requirements determine levels of employment and wages, the nature and quantity of goods produced, and their method of manufacture.

Workers see themselves as prisoners of market forces over which they have no control. They are subject to the impersonal mechanisms of the law of supply and demand. They are at the mercy of the periodic booms and slumps that characterize capitalist economies. The workers therefore lose control over the objects they produce and become alienated from their product and the act of production. Their work becomes a means to an end, a means of obtaining money to buy the goods and services necessary for their existence. Unable to fulfil their being in the products of their labour, the workers become alienated from themselves in the act of production. Therefore, the more the workers produce, the more they lose themselves. In Marx's words, 'the greater this product the less he is himself'. (Alienation and labour in capitalist society are examined in Chapter 10, pp. 687–9.)

In Marx's view, the market forces that are seen to control production are not impersonal mechanisms beyond the control of humanity: they are human-made. Alienation is therefore the result of human activity rather than external forces with an existence independent of humanity. If the products of labour are alien to the worker, they must belong to somebody else. This somebody else is the capitalist who owns and controls the means of production and the products of labour, who appropriates the wealth that labour produces. Alienation therefore springs not from impersonal market forces but from relationships. Alienation will come to an end when the contradiction between human consciousness and objective reality is resolved. Then people will realize that the situation in which they find themselves is human-made and therefore subject to change by human action.

Communism

Given the priority Marx assigns to economic factors, an end to alienation involves a radical change in the economic infrastructure. In particular, it requires the abolition of private property and its replacement by communal ownership of the means of production – that is, the replacement of capitalism by communism. Marx saw communism as 'the positive abolition of private property and thus of human self-alienation and therefore the real reappropriation of the human essence by and for man. This is communism as the complete and conscious return of man himself as a social, that is human being.'

In communist society conflicts of interest will disappear and antagonistic groups such as capitalists and workers will be a thing of the past. The products of labour will no longer be appropriated by some at the expense of others. With divisions in society eradicated, humans will be at one with their fellows, truly social beings. As such they will not lose themselves in the products of their labour. They will produce both for themselves and others at one and the same time. In this situation 'each of us would have doubly affirmed himself and his fellow man'. Since individuals are at one with their fellows, the products of their labour, in which they objectify themselves, will not result in the loss of self. In productive labour each member of society contributes to the well-being of all and so expresses both their individual and social being. The objects that they produce are owned and controlled at once by themselves and their fellow humans.

Class

In Marx's view, humans are essentially social beings. He writes that 'society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of inter-relations, the relations within which these individuals stand'.

An understanding of human history therefore involves an examination of these relationships, the most important of which are the relations of production.

Apart from communities based on primitive communism at the dawn of history, all societies are divided into social groups known as classes. The relationship between classes is one of antagonism and conflict. Throughout history, opposing classes have stood in 'constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of contending classes'.

Class conflict forms the basis of the dialectic of social change. In Marx's view, expressed in the opening line of the *Communist Manifesto*, 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the class struggle' (Marx and Engels, 1950, first published 1848).

The two-class model

Class divisions result from the differing relationships of members of society to the means of production. The structure of all societies may be represented in terms of a simplified two-class model, consisting of a ruling and a subject class. The ruling class owes its dominance and power to its ownership and control of the means of production. The subjection and relative powerlessness of the subject class are due to its lack of ownership and therefore lack of control of the means of production. The conflict of interest between the two classes stems from the fact that productive labour is performed by the subject class, yet a large part of the wealth so produced is appropriated by the ruling class. Since one class gains at the expense of another, the interests of their members are incompatible. The classes stand opposed as exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed. The labour of the subject class takes on the character of 'forced labour'. Since its members lack the necessary means to produce for themselves, they are forced to work for others.

Although Marx saw capitalism as characterized by a central struggle between two main classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat – he did recognize the existence of other classes. Some classes were left over from previous eras (such as the landowning aristocracy and peasants), and there were intermediate classes (such as the petty bourgeoisie of the self-employed and people with their own small businesses). Marx also recognized that there was a growing middle class of administrative workers in capitalist businesses, although he made little attempt to discuss the implications of this. (See articles such as 'The class struggles in France' and 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' – both in Marx and Engels, 1950 – for examples of Marx's more complex views on class.) However, to Marx, these complications merely obscured the central importance of the two-class struggle, which would be at the heart of capitalism as it developed.

Class and consciousness

Members of both the main social classes are largely unaware of the true nature of their situation, of the reality of the relationship between ruling and subject classes. Members of the ruling class assume that their particular interests are those of society as a whole; members of the subject class accept this view of reality and regard their situation as part of the natural order of things. This false consciousness is due to the fact that the relationships of dominance and subordination in the economic infrastructure are largely reproduced in the superstructure of society. In Marx's words, the relations of production constitute 'the real foundation on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life.' Ruling class dominance is confirmed and legitimated in legal statutes, religious proscriptions and political legislation. The consciousness of all members of society is infused with ruling-class ideology which proclaims the essential rightness, normality and inevitability of the status quo.

While the superstructure may stabilize society and contain its contradictions over long periods of time, this situation cannot be permanent. The fundamental contradictions of class societies will eventually find expression and will finally be resolved by the dialectic of historical change. A radical change in the structure of society occurs when a class is transformed from a 'class in itself' to a 'class for itself'. A 'class in itself' refers to members of society who share the same objective relationships to the means of production. Thus, as wage labourers, members of the proletariat form a class in itself.

However, a class only becomes a 'class for itself' when its members are fully conscious of the true nature of their situation; when they are fully aware of their common interests and common enemy; when they realize that only by concerted action can they overthrow their oppressors; and when they unite and take positive, practical steps to do so. When a class becomes a class for itself, the contradiction between the consciousness of its members and the reality of their situation is ended.

Social change

The transition from feudalism to capitalism

A class becomes a class for itself when the forces of production have developed to the point where they cannot be contained within the existing relations of production. In Marx's words, 'For an oppressed class to be able to emancipate itself, it is essential that the existing forces of production and the existing social relations should be incapable of standing side by side.' Revolutionary change requires that the forces of production, on which the new order will be based, have developed in the old society. Therefore the 'new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society'.

This process may be illustrated by the transition from feudal to capitalist society. Industrial capitalism gradually developed within the framework of feudal society. In order to develop fully, it required 'the free wage labourer who sells his labour-power to capital'. This provides a mobile labour force that can be hired and fired at will, and so efficiently utilized as a commodity in the service of capital. However, the feudal relations of production, which involved 'landed property with serf labour chained to it', tended to prevent the development of wage labourers. Eventually, though, the forces of production of capitalism gained sufficient strength and impetus to lead to the destruction of the feudal system. At this point the rising class, the bourgeoisie, became a class for itself, and its members united to overthrow the feudal relations of production. When they succeeded, the contradiction between the new forces of production and the old relations of production was resolved.

Once a new economic order is established, the superstructure of the previous era is rapidly transformed. The contradiction between the new infrastructure and the old superstructure is now ended. Thus the political dominance of the feudal aristocracy was replaced by the power of the newly enfranchised bourgeoisie. The dominant concepts of feudalism, such as loyalty and honour, were replaced by the new concepts of freedom and equality. In terms of the new ideology, the wage labourer of capitalist society is free to sell his or her labour power to the highest bidder. The relationship between employer and employee is defined as a relationship between equals: the exchange of labour for wages as an exchange of equivalents.

But the resolution of old contradictions does not necessarily mean an end to contradictions in society. As in previous eras, the transition from feudalism to capitalism merely results in the replacement of an old set of contradictions by a new set.

The transition from capitalism to communism

The predicted rise of the proletariat is not strictly analogous with the rise of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie formed a privileged minority of industrialists, merchants and financiers who forged new forces of production within feudal society. The proletariat forms an unprivileged majority which does not create new forces of production within capitalist society.

Marx believed, however, that the contradictions of capitalism were sufficient to transform the proletariat into a class for itself and bring about the downfall of the bourgeoisie. He saw the magnitude of these contradictions and the intensity of class conflict steadily increasing as capitalism developed. Thus there is a steady polarization of the two major classes as the intermediate strata are submerged into the proletariat. As capital accumulates, it is concentrated more and more into fewer hands – a process accompanied by the relative pauperization of the proletariat.

Production assumes an increasingly social and cooperative character as larger and larger groups of workers are concentrated in factories. At the same time the wealth produced by labour is appropriated by fewer and fewer individuals, as greater competition drives all but the larger companies out of business.

Such processes magnify and illuminate the contradictions of capitalism and increase the intensity of conflict. It is only a matter of time before members of the proletariat recognize that the reality of their situation is the alienation of labour. This awareness will lead the proletariat to 'a revolt to which it is forced by the contradiction between its humanity and its situation, which is an open, clear and absolute negation of its humanity'. (Marxist views on class and class conflict are outlined in Chapter 2, pp. 33–6.)

The communist society, that Marx predicted would arise from the ruins of capitalism, will begin with a transitional phase, 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. Once the communist system has been fully established, the dictatorship's reason for being (and therefore its existence) will end. Bourgeois society represents 'the closing chapter of the prehistoric stage of human society'. The communist society of the new era is without classes, without contradictions. The dialectical principle now ceases to operate. The contradictions of human history have now been negated in a final harmonious synthesis.

Marxism – a critique

Judging from the constant reinterpretations, impassioned defences and vehement criticisms of Marx's work, his ideas are as alive and relevant today as they ever were. Specific criticisms of Marx's views on society have been examined in previous

chapters and will not therefore be covered in detail in this section.

Many of his critics have argued that history has failed to substantiate Marx's views on the direction of social change. Thus they claim that class conflict, far from growing in intensity, has become institutionalized in advanced capitalist society. They see little indication of the proletariat becoming a class for itself. Rather than moving towards a polarization of classes, they argue that the class structure of capitalist society has become increasingly complex and differentiated. In particular, a steadily growing middle class has emerged between the proletariat and bourgeoisie.

Turning to communist society, critics have argued that history has not borne out the promise of communism contained in Marx's writings. Significant social inequalities are present in communist regimes, and there are few, if any, signs of a movement towards equality. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s suggests that the promise of communism has been replaced by the desire for Western-style democracies.

Particular criticism has been directed towards the priority that Marx assigned to economic factors in his explanation of social structure and social change.

Max Weber's study of ascetic Protestantism argued that religious beliefs provided the ethics, attitudes and motivations for the development of capitalism. Since ascetic Protestantism preceded the advent of capitalism, Weber maintained that, at certain times and places, aspects of the superstructure can play a primary role in directing change (see Chapter 7, pp. 447–51).

However, as previous chapters have indicated, Marxism is sufficiently flexible to counter such criticism, and to provide explanations for historical changes that have occurred since Marx's death.

Economic determinism

This section closes with a brief examination of what many see as the central issue of Marxism – the question of 'economic determinism'. Critics have often rejected Marxism on this basis, although they admit that the charge of economic determinism is more applicable to certain of Marx's followers than to Marx himself.

It is possible to select numerous quotations from Marx's writings that support the views of his critics. In terms of these quotations, history can be presented as a mechanical process directed by economic forces which follow 'iron laws'. Humans are compelled to act in terms of the constraints imposed by the economy, and passively respond to impersonal forces rather than actively construct their own history. Thus the proletariat is 'compelled' by its economic situation to overthrow the bourgeoisie. The contradictions in the capitalist infrastructure will inevitably result in its destruction. The superstructure is 'determined' by the infrastructure, and human consciousness is shaped by economic forces independent of human will and beyond humanity's control. In this way, Marx can be presented as a crude positivist who sees causation solely in terms of economic forces.

A defence of Marx

On closer examination, however, Marx's writings prove more subtle and less dogmatic than many of his critics have suggested. Marx rejected a simplistic, one-directional view of causation. Although he gave priority to economic factors, they form only one aspect of the dialectic of history. From this perspective, the economy is the primary but not the sole determinant of social change. The idea of the dialectic involves an interplay between the various parts of society. It rejects the view of unidirectional causation proceeding solely from economic factors. Instead it argues that the various parts of society are inter-related in terms of their mutual effect.

Marx described the economic infrastructure as the 'ultimately determinant element in history'. Yet Engels argued that:

> *if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract and senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure ... also exert their influence upon the course of the historical struggle and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.*
>
> Marx and Engels, 1950b, p. 443

Thus the various aspects of the superstructure have a certain degree of autonomy and a part to play in influencing the course of history. They are not automatically and mechanically determined by the infrastructure.

Marx consistently argued that 'man makes his own history'. The history of human society is not the product of impersonal forces; it is the result of people's purposive activity. In Marx's view, 'It is not "history" which uses men as a means of achieving – as if it were an individual person – its own ends. History is *nothing* but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends' (Marx, in Bottomore and Rubel (eds), 1963). Since people make society, only people can change society. Radical change results from a consciousness of reality and direct action. Thus members of the proletariat must be fully aware of their situation and take active steps in order to change it. Although a successful revolution depends ultimately on the economic situation, it requires human initiative. People must make their own utopia.

Neo-Marxism

Neo-Marxists are sociologists whose work has been inspired by Marx's theories, but who nevertheless have developed a distinctive approach of their own. In one way or another they have broken with conventional Marxist theory in order, as they see it, to understand society more adequately. There is no clear dividing line between Marxists and neo-Marxists. As the last section indicated, there are various interpretations of Marx's work, and it is possible for Marxists to disagree without rejecting Marx's overall approach. Nevertheless, some sociological theories that might be described as Marxist are sufficiently different from Marx's own work to merit the description of 'neo-Marxist'.

Antonio Gramsci

Most neo-Marxist perspectives are characterized by the use of some concepts that are different from those that Marx used. Generally they reject the extent to which Marx concentrated upon economic, material factors in determining the historical development of societies. An example of neo-Marxism, the work of Antonio Gramsci, was examined in Chapter 9 (see pp. 615–17).

Gramsci (1891–1937) suggested that ownership of the means of production was not sufficient to guarantee that a ruling class would monopolize power in a society. In order to maintain its leadership and dominance, or, as he called it, 'hegemony', a ruling class had to actively try to win support from other members of society. He did not believe that the ruling class could ever rely upon false class consciousness to guarantee its position, since all members of the subject classes had some awareness of their exploitation. The ruling class needed to make some real concessions to other groups in society in order to win their support. Thus the state could not always act exclusively in the interests of the owners of the means of production.

Gramsci also differed from Marx in placing greater emphasis on the importance of divisions within classes as well as between classes. Thus, for example, agricultural and industrial workers might to some extent have different interests, and the state might exploit the existence of these divisions in order to maintain ruling-class hegemony.

Like many neo-Marxists, Gramsci attached rather more importance than Marx to the culture of a society, and to the institutions of the superstructure, such as the church, the mass media, and the education system. He also placed more stress upon the role of ideas in maintaining political stability.

Marxism and other perspectives

Some neo-Marxists have tried to develop Marxism by drawing upon other sociological perspectives. For example, Paul Willis (1977), in his study of the transition from school to work (see pp. 791–4), combined a Marxist analysis of society with a study of small-scale interaction that owes much to an interactionist perspective. Similarly, Ian Taylor, Paul Walton and Jock Young in *The New Criminology* (1973) argued that the insights of various sociological perspectives were necessary in order to produce a 'fully social theory' of crime. Taylor *et al.* nevertheless claimed that their theory would only make sense if the insights of other perspectives were related to an overall Marxist framework for the analysis of society.

Neo-Marxism – a critique

Much of the appeal of Marx as a sociologist lies with the simplicity of his basic theory. This simplicity is both its principal strength and its main weakness. On the one hand, it provides the basis for a study of society that has a clear starting point. From this starting point it is possible to develop logically connected arguments and to make predictions about the development of societies. On the other hand, it leaves Marx open to the criticism that he has ignored important factors that influence social life.

Neo-Marxism has developed as a response both to the criticisms levelled at Marx, and to developments in societies since his death which seem to undermine his theory. Neo-Marxists have been able to overcome some criticisms of Marx, but in doing so have left themselves open to the claim that they have developed no clear alternative approach to understanding society. Neo-Marxists reduce the role of the economy in their theories, and attach more importance to cultural and ideological aspects of society. But they are generally unable to specify when, and in what circumstances, cultural or economic factors are more important in shaping society. Some neo-Marxists move so far away from Marx that their views seem little different to some of the theories that will now be examined.

Conflict theory

Conflict theory has its origins in the work of Max Weber. As Chapter 2 indicated (see pp. 36–8), Weber rejected the view that the division between the owners and non-owners of property was the only significant division between groups in society. He argued that there could be numerous divisions within the two basic classes, depending upon the 'market situation' of individuals (Weber, 1978).

Furthermore, he suggested that people could be divided by their status situation and political interests as well as by their economic position. 'Parties' could be formed on the basis of status groupings or classes, but it was also possible for them to cut across class or status groups.

Weber's views on classes, status groups and parties reflect the main themes of conflict theory. Conflict theorists argue that the social structure is much more complex than Marx's work suggests. It consists of many different groups, not just two classes. Furthermore, although conflict theorists accept that these groups have different interests, these interests are not just economic. For example, a particular group might strive for greater prestige or status rather than greater economic power.

In a neat summary of conflict theory, Ian Craib describes it in the following way: 'Society is like a more or less confused battle ground. If we watch from on high, we can see a variety of groups fighting each other, constantly forming and reforming, making and breaking alliances' (Craib, 1984).

Conflict theory has strongly influenced the work of John Goldthorpe on stratification (see pp. 114–17). However, in order to illustrate and evaluate conflict theory, the work of another sociologist, Ralph Dahrendorf, will now be examined.

Ralf Dahrendorf – authority and conflict

Post-capitalism

Dahrendorf's conflict theory arose out of a critical evaluation of the work of Karl Marx (Dahrendorf, 1959). Dahrendorf accepted that Marx's description of capitalism was generally accurate in the nineteenth century when Marx was writing, but he argued that in the twentieth century it had become outdated as a basis for explaining conflict. Dahrendorf argued that important changes had taken place in countries such as Britain and the USA. They were now 'post-capitalist' societies.

Dahrendorf claimed that, far from the two main classes becoming polarized, as Marx had predicted, the opposite had happened. The proportion of skilled and semi-skilled workers had grown, as had the size of the 'new middle class' of white-collar workers, such as clerks, nurses and teachers. Inequalities in income and wealth had been reduced, partly because of changes in the social structure, and partly because of measures taken by the state. Social mobility had become more common, and, crucially, the link between ownership and control in industry had been broken. Managers, rather than owners, exercised day-to-day control over the means of production.

In these circumstances, Marx's claim that conflict was based upon the ownership or non-ownership of wealth was no longer valid. This was because there was no longer a close association between wealth and power. Shareholders, for example, might own the wealth of a company, but in practice they did not exercise close control over the management.

In view of these changes, Dahrendorf argued that conflicts were no longer based upon the existence of the two classes identified by Marx, nor were they based upon economic divisions. Instead, Dahrendorf saw conflict as being concerned with authority.

Authority

To Dahrendorf, authority is legitimate power attached to the occupation of a particular social role within an organization. Thus, for example, a manager in a company, or a teacher in a classroom, has the right to take certain decisions regardless of the wishes of the workforce or pupils. A manager has the authority to instruct workers to arrive on time, and a teacher has the authority to instruct pupils to do homework. All organizations – or associations, as Dahrendorf calls them – have positions of domination and subjection. Some are able to take decisions legitimately and issue commands, and others are not. It is this situation which Dahrendorf saw as the basis for conflict in 'post-capitalist' societies.

Authority and quasi-groups

Dahrendorf believed that the existence of dominant and subordinate positions produces a situation in which individuals have different interests. Those occupying dominant positions have an interest in maintaining a social structure that gives them more authority than others. Those in subordinate positions, on the other hand, have an interest in changing a social structure that deprives them of authority. This conflict of interests is present in a much wider range of social relationships than the economic conflict of interests between the ruling

class and the subject class that Marx identified as the basis for conflict in society.

As a consequence, there are many different 'quasi-groups' or potential groups that could be in conflict with each other. Some of these quasi-groups will join together and act to pursue their common interests. Individuals may belong to a whole variety of different groups, and they are not necessarily confined in all areas of social life to subordinate or dominant groups. Dahrendorf said, 'Since domination in industry does not necessarily involve domination in the state, or a church, or other associations, total societies can present the picture of a plurality of competing dominant (and, conversely, subjected) aggregates.' Thus, a person who is a manager and has a position of authority in a company will tend to act to maintain that authority; but if, for example, the same person has a subordinate position in a religious organization, they may try to change the organization to increase their own authority.

Dahrendorf and conflict theory – a critique

Not surprisingly, Marxists do not accept Dahrendorf's view that Marx's theory is no longer applicable to contemporary societies. For example, the British Marxist John Westergaard (1997) believes that Britain is still fundamentally divided between two classes, and he denies that inequality between rich and poor has been decreasing in recent decades.

More importantly, though, some sociologists question whether Dahrendorf's approach can actually explain conflict. Ian Craib (1984) points out that Dahrendorf admits that subordinate groups may defer to the authority of dominant groups as well as challenging it. Thus members of a workforce may work conscientiously or they may strike, but Dahrendorf fails to explain adequately why they will follow one course rather than another. Craib suggests that Dahrendorf's only answer is to suggest that it is a matter of individual choice, but this does not actually explain why on some occasions there is conflict – for example, a strike – and on others there is none.

More generally, conflict theory, whether Dahrendorf's or that of other writers, produces a rather confused picture of the social structure. Society is portrayed as consisting of so many different groups, all of which may be in conflict with each other, that it is difficult to get a clear picture of how society works. It is not clear what the end result of the conflict will be: who will win and who will lose. Nor does conflict theory provide an adequate explanation of why one group will be successful and another will not. Marxism and neo-Marxism give more coherent answers to these types of question. On the other hand, conflict theory is able to encompass conflict between such groups as men and women, which does not fit neatly into a Marxist framework for understanding society.

Conflict theory represented an important break from Marxism and helped to provide the basis for the development of some later theories. In particular, post-structuralists and postmodernists have gone much further in arguing that there are numerous types of social division and sources of inequality. Indeed, post-structuralists and postmodernists think more in terms of *difference* than division and inequality (see pp. 1068–75 for a discussion of postmodernism).

Social action and interpretive perspectives

Sociologists who adopt social action or interpretive perspectives usually reject the view that society has a clear structure that directs individuals to behave in certain ways. Some social action theorists do not deny the existence of a social structure, but see this structure as rising out of the action of individuals. Thus Weber, who to some extent spans the gap between structural and social action perspectives, acknowledges the existence of classes, status groups and parties, but he challenges the view of Durkheim that society exists independently of the individuals who make up society. Symbolic interactionists accept the existence of social roles, but deny that these roles are fixed and inflexible, or determined by the supposed 'needs' of the social system. Phenomenology and ethnomethodology represent a much more radical rejection of structural perspectives. They deny the existence of any sort of social structure.

All of these perspectives argue that sociologists need to understand and interpret human behaviour and discover the meanings that lie behind it. Phenomenology and ethnomethodology claim that sociology can go no further than reaching an understanding of the meanings that individuals attach to the world around them.

These perspectives will now be examined in detail.

Max Weber

The German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) is widely regarded as one of the three great founders of sociology, with Marx and Durkheim. Although Weber

identified aspects of the social structure such as class, parties, status groups and bureaucracies, all of these groupings were made up of individuals carrying out social actions. Furthermore, it was social actions which, according to Weber, should be the focus of study in sociology.

Social action

In one of his most important works, *Economy and Society* (1978, first published in the 1920s), Weber said, 'Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences.' By making this statement Weber was trying to spell out the precise limits of what could and could not be explained in sociological terms.

To Weber, a social action was an action carried out by an individual to which a person attached a meaning; an action which, in his words, 'takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course'. Thus, an action that a person does not think about cannot be a social action. For example, an accidental collision of bicycles or an involuntary cry of pain are not social actions because they are not the result of any conscious thought process. Furthermore, if an action does not take account of the existence and possible reactions of others, it is not social. If a person prays in private, in secrecy, it cannot be a social action – nobody knows about it and the actor could not be taking account of the possible actions of others.

Social action and *Verstehen*

Having identified the subject matter of sociology, Weber went on to suggest how social action could be explained. Before the cause of a social action could be found, it was necessary to understand the meaning attached to it by the actor. He distinguished two types of understanding.

First, he referred to *aktuelles Verstehen*, which can roughly be translated as direct observational understanding. For example, it is possible to understand that someone is angry by observing their facial expression. Similarly, it is possible to understand what is happening when a woodcutter hits a piece of wood with an axe – that is, the woodcutter is chopping wood. However, this is not, to Weber, a sufficient level of understanding to begin to explain social action.

The second type of understanding is *erklärendes Verstehen*, or explanatory understanding. In this case the sociologist must try to understand the meaning of an act in terms of the motives that have given rise to it. Thus *erklärendes Verstehen* would require an understanding of why the woodcutter was chopping wood. Was it in order to earn a wage, to make a fire, or to work off anger? To achieve this type of understanding it is necessary to put yourself in the shoes of the person whose behaviour you are explaining. You should imagine yourself in their situation to try to get at the motives behind their actions.

Causal explanations

Even this level of understanding is not sufficient to explain a series of actions or events. For a full causal explanation it is necessary to determine what has given rise to the motives that led to the actions. Here Weber advocated the use of methods closer to a positivist approach. He attempted to discover connections between events and to establish causal relationships. This can be seen from his study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958) (see pp. 447–51).

Weber tried to show that there was a relationship between ascetic Protestantism and capitalism. He claimed that ascetic Protestantism preceded capitalism and was found almost exclusively in those countries that became capitalist. Nevertheless, this was not sufficient to convince Weber that there was a causal connection between the two, because it did not establish how or why ascetic Protestantism contributed to the rise of capitalism. In order to establish this link, Weber tried to understand the motives of ascetic Protestants for adopting capitalist behaviour. He believed that their main motive was to convince themselves that they were predestined to go to heaven.

Weber's work on the rise of capitalism illustrates his belief that social actions, particularly those involving large numbers of people behaving in similar ways, could lead to large-scale social changes such as the advent of capitalism. Furthermore, even when Weber sounds rather like a structuralist sociologist, he usually insists that he is really describing a type of social action. Thus, while society might contain institutions and social groups, these institutions and social groups are composed of individuals engaged in social action. Weber said:

> *when reference is made in a sociological context to a state, a nation, a corporation, a family or an army corps, or to similar collectivities, what is meant is ... only a certain kind of development of actual or possible social actions of individual persons.*
>
> Weber, 1958

Social action and bureaucracy

Weber's general views on the relationship between institutions and social action can be illustrated by his important work on bureaucracies. Bureaucracies

might be seen as institutions that closely control and direct human behaviour or social actions. Although Weber was aware of, and indeed concerned about, the power of bureaucracies in restricting human freedom, he nevertheless saw them as composed of individuals carrying out social actions. Thus he believed that bureaucracies consisted of individuals carrying out rational social actions designed to achieve the goals of bureaucracies.

Significantly, Weber saw the whole development of modern societies in terms of a move towards rational social action. Thus, to Weber, modern societies were undergoing a process of rationalization, as affective or emotional action and action directed by custom and tradition (traditional action) became less important. Weber's views on bureaucracy will now be examined in detail.

Bureaucracy and rationalization

Weber believed that bureaucratic organizations were the dominant institutions of industrial society (Weber, 1964). We will examine Weber's definition of bureaucracy in detail shortly but, briefly, he saw it as an organization with a hierarchy of paid, full-time officials who formed a chain of command. A bureaucracy is concerned with the business of administration: with controlling, managing and coordinating a complex series of tasks. Bureaucratic organizations are increasingly dominating the institutional landscape: departments of state, political parties, business enterprises, the military, education and churches are all organized on bureaucratic lines.

To appreciate the nature of modern society, Weber maintained that an understanding of the process of bureaucratization is essential. Marxists see fundamental differences between capitalist and socialist industrial societies. To Weber their differences are minimal compared to the essential similarity of bureaucratic organization. This is the defining characteristic of modern industrial society.

Bureaucracy and rational action

Weber's view of bureaucracy must be seen in the context of his general theory of social action. He argued that all human action is directed by meanings. Thus, in order to understand and explain an action, the meanings and motives that lie behind it must be appreciated. Weber identified various types of action that are distinguished by the meanings on which they are based. These include 'affective' or 'emotional action', 'traditional action' and 'rational action':

1 Affective or emotional action stems from an individual's emotional state at a particular time. A loss of temper which results in verbal abuse or physical violence is an example of affective action.
2 Traditional action is based on established custom. Individuals act in a certain way because of ingrained habit: because things have always been done that way. They have no real awareness of why they do something; their actions are simply second nature.
3 By comparison, rational action involves a clear awareness of a goal: it is the action of a manager who wishes to increase productivity or of a builder contracted to erect a block of flats. In both cases the goal is clearly defined. Rational action also involves a systematic assessment of the various means of attaining a goal and the selection of the most appropriate means to do so. Thus, if a capitalist in the building trade aimed to maximize profit, she or he would carefully evaluate factors such as alternative sites, raw materials, building techniques, labour costs and the potential market, in order to realize her or his goal. This would entail a precise calculation of costs and the careful weighing up of the advantages and disadvantages of the various factors involved. The action is rational since, in Weber's words, rational action is 'the methodical attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of means'.

Weber believed that rational action had become the dominant mode of action in modern industrial society. He saw it expressed in a wide variety of areas: in state administration, business, education, science, and even in Western classical music. He referred to the increasing dominance of rational action as the 'process of rationalization'.

Bureaucratization is a prime example of this process. A bureaucratic organization has a clearly defined goal. It involves the precise calculation of the means to attain this goal and systematically eliminating those factors that stand in the way of the achievement of its objectives. Bureaucracy is therefore rational action in an institutional form.

Bureaucracy and control

Bureaucracy is also a system of control. It involves a hierarchical organization in which superiors strictly control and discipline the activities of subordinates. Weber argued that, in any large-scale task, some people must coordinate and control the activities of others. He stated that 'the imperative coordination of the action of a considerable number of men requires control of a staff of persons'. In order for this control to be effective, it must be regarded as legitimate. There must be a 'minimum of voluntary submission' to higher authority.

Legitimacy can be based on various types of meanings. For example, it can result from traditional or rational meanings, and therefore can take the form of traditional authority or rational authority. The *form* of the organizational structure derives from

the *type* of legitimacy on which it is based. In Weber's words:

> *According to the kind of legitimacy which is claimed, the type of obedience, the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it and the mode of exercising authority, will all differ fundamentally.*
>
> Weber, 1978, p. 213

To understand bureaucracy, it is therefore necessary for us to appreciate the type of legitimacy on which bureaucratic control is based.

Weber identified three forms of legitimacy, which derive from the three types of social action discussed above. Affective, traditional and rational actions each provide a particular motive for obedience, a motive based respectively on emotion, custom and rationality. These types of legitimate control are 'charismatic authority', 'traditional authority' and 'rational-legal authority'. Each results in a particular form of organizational structure. Weber constructed models to represent each type of authority.

1 Charismatic authority and organizational structure

Organizational structures that derive from charismatic authority are fluid and ill-defined. Those who occupy positions of authority either share the charisma of the leader or possess a charisma of their own. They are not selected on the basis of family ties to the leader or on the basis of technical qualifications. There is no fixed hierarchy of officials and no legal rules govern the organization of leaders and followers. Jesus's disciples provide an example of leadership positions in a charismatic movement.

There is no systematically organized economic support for the movement; its members typically rely on charity or plunder. Since charismatic authority depends for its control on the person of the leader, it is necessarily short-lived. After the leader's death, the movement must become 'routinized' in terms of either traditional or rational-legal authority, if it is to survive. Thus the organizational control of the Christian church is no longer directly based on the charisma of its founder. Instead it has been routinized in terms of both traditional and rational-legal authorities.

2 Traditional authority and organizational structure

The organizational structure that derives from the second type of authority, traditional authority, takes two main forms: the first is a household that includes relatives, favourites and servants who are dependent on the head of the household; the second is a system of vassals such as feudal lords who swear an oath of loyalty to the king or queen and hold land on this basis. The duties of both the household retainers and the vassals are defined by custom but may be changed according to the inclination of the particular ruler. This organizational structure is of little importance in contemporary societies.

3 Rational-legal authority and organizational structure

Like other forms of authority, rational-legal authority produces a particular kind of organizational structure. This is bureaucracy, which Weber defined as 'A hierarchical organization designed rationally to coordinate the work of many individuals in the pursuit of large-scale administrative tasks and organizational goals.'

Weber constructed an ideal type of the rational-legal bureaucratic organization. He argued that bureaucracies in modern industrial society are steadily moving towards this 'pure' type. The ideal type of bureaucracy contains the following elements:

1. 'The regular activities required for the purposes of the organization are distributed in a fixed way as official duties' (Gerth and Mills (eds), 1948). Each administrative official has a clearly defined area of responsibility. Complex tasks are broken down into manageable parts, with each official specializing in a particular area. For example, state administration is divided into various departments such as education, defence and the environment. Within each department every official has a clearly defined sphere of competence and responsibility.
2. 'The organization of offices follows the principle of hierarchy; that is every lower office is under the control and supervision of a higher one' (Weber, 1978). A chain of command and responsibility is established whereby officials are accountable to their immediate superior both for the conduct of their own official duties and those of everybody below them.
3. The operations of the bureaucracy are governed by 'a consistent system of abstract rules' and the 'application of these rules to particular cases' (Gerth and Mills (eds), 1948). These rules clearly define the limits of the authority held by various officials in the hierarchy. Obedience to superiors stems from a belief in the correctness of the rules. The rules also lay down fixed procedures for the performance of each task. They impose strict discipline and control, leaving little room for personal initiative or discretion.
4. The 'ideal official' performs his or her duties in 'a spirit of formalistic impersonality ... without hatred or passion' (Weber, 1978). The activities of the bureaucrat are governed by the rules, not by personal considerations such as feelings towards colleagues or clients. The actions are therefore

rational rather than affective. Business is conducted 'according to *calculable rules* and "without regard for persons"' (Weber, 1978).

5 Officials are appointed on the basis of technical knowledge and expertise. Weber stated that 'Bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge. This is the feature of it which makes it specifically rational.' Thus officials are selected in terms of the contribution their particular knowledge and skills can make to the realization of organizational goals. Once appointed, the official is a full-time paid employee and his or her occupation constitutes a career. Promotion is based on seniority or achievement or a combination of both.

6 Bureaucratic administration involves a strict separation of private and official income. Officials do not own any part of the organization for which they work, nor can they use their position for private gain. In Weber's words, 'Bureaucracy segregates official activity as something distinct from the sphere of private life.'

The 'technical superiority' of bureaucracy

The ideal type of bureaucracy is never completely achieved in reality. Several of its characteristics are found in the state administrations of Ancient Egypt, China and the later stages of the Roman Empire. The ideal type is most closely approximated in capitalist–industrial society where it has become the major form of organizational control.

The development of bureaucracy is due to its 'technical superiority' compared to organizations based on charismatic and traditional authority. Weber argued that 'The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization.' This technical superiority stems from the combination of specialist skills subordinated to the goals of the organization. Personal emotions and interests, which might detract from the attainment of those goals, are excluded; while a set of rational rules is designed specifically to further the objectives of the organization. Compared to other forms of organization, tasks in a bureaucracy are performed with greater precision and speed, and with less friction and lower costs.

Bureaucracy and freedom

Although Weber appreciated the technical advantages of bureaucratic organization, he was also aware of its disadvantages. He saw the strict control of officials restricted to very specialized tasks as a limitation of human freedom. The uniform and rational procedures of bureaucratic practice largely prevent spontaneity, creativity and individual initiative. The impersonality of official conduct tends to produce 'specialists without spirit'. Bureaucratic organization produces an iron cage which imprisons and restricts people.

Weber foresaw the possibility of people being trapped in their specialized routines, with little awareness of the relationship between their jobs and the organization as a whole. He wrote, 'It is horrible to think that the world would one day be filled with little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards the bigger ones.'

Weber also foresaw the danger of bureaucrats becoming preoccupied with uniformity and order, losing sight of all else and becoming dependent on the security provided by their highly structured niche in the bureaucratic machine. He believed it was as if:

> *we were deliberately to become men who need 'order' and nothing but order, become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it.*
>
> Weber, 1978, p. 1401

To Weber, the process of rationalization, of which bureaucracy is the prime expression, is basically irrational. It is ultimately aimless since it tends to destroy the traditional values that give meaning and purpose to life. For him, the 'great question' is 'what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parcelling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life?' (quoted in Nisbet, 1967).

Despite his forebodings, Weber thought that bureaucracy was essential to the operation of large-scale industrial societies. In particular, he believed that the state and economic enterprises could not function effectively without bureaucratic control. It therefore made little sense to try to dispense with bureaucracies. However, Weber was fearful of the ends to which bureaucratic organization could be directed. It represented the most complete and effective institutionalization of power so far created. In Weber's eyes, 'bureaucracy has been and is a power instrument of the first order – for the one who controls the bureaucratic apparatus' (Weber, 1978).

Weber was particularly concerned about the control of state bureaucratic administration. He saw two main dangers if this control was left in the hands of bureaucrats themselves:

1 Particularly in times of crisis, bureaucratic leadership would be ineffective. Bureaucrats are trained to follow orders and conduct routine operations rather than to make policy decisions and take initiatives in response to crises.

2 In capitalist society, top bureaucrats may be swayed by the pressure of capitalist interests and tailor their administrative practices to fit the demands of capital.

Weber argued that these dangers could only be avoided by strong parliamentary control of the state bureaucracy. In particular, professional politicians must hold the top positions in the various departments of state. This would encourage strong and effective leadership since politicians are trained to take decisions. In addition it would help to open the bureaucracy to public view and reveal any behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing between bureaucrats and powerful interests. Politicians are public figures, open to public scrutiny and the criticism of opposition parties. They are therefore accountable for their actions.

Bureaucrats and politicians

Even with politicians at the head of state bureaucracies, problems remain. Weber observed that 'The political master always finds himself *vis-à-vis* the trained official, in the position of a dilettante facing the expert.' Professional politicians lack the technical knowledge controlled by the bureaucracy and may have little awareness of its inner workings and procedures. They are largely dependent on the information supplied by bureaucrats and upon their advice as to the feasibility of the measures the politician wishes to take. The politician may well end up being directed by the bureaucrat.

Weber believed that only strong parliamentary government could control state bureaucracy. He suggested that state bureaucrats should be made directly and regularly accountable to Parliament for their actions. The procedure for doing this was the parliamentary committee, which would systematically cross-examine top civil servants. In Weber's view, 'This alone guarantees public supervision and a thorough inquiry.'

Weber's view of bureaucracy is ambivalent. He recognized its 'technical superiority' over all other forms of organization. He believed that it was essential for the effective operation of large-scale industrial society. While he saw it as a threat to responsible government, he believed that this threat could be countered by strong political control. However, he remained pessimistic about the consequences of bureaucracy for human freedom and happiness.

Materialism and idealism

Given the importance that Weber attached to social action, it is not surprising that he also attached considerable importance to the role of ideas in shaping social life. Weber was very much opposed to what he saw as the one-sided materialism of Marxism. He denied that human beliefs were entirely shaped by material or economic forces; indeed, his work on Protestantism suggested that religious beliefs could transform an economic system.

However, Weber was equally concerned to reject a one-sided idealism that saw human history as directed by the ideas and beliefs held by people. Instead, Weber maintained that both material factors and beliefs were important. He believed that religious beliefs could develop quite independently of material factors – for example, through theological arguments within a church. On the other hand, new beliefs would only be taken up if circumstances made them likely to thrive. Thus, material circumstances might affect whether or not ideas became widely accepted, but they did not determine what ideas were produced in the first place.

Weber adopted a similar type of argument to explain the role of religion in the advent of capitalism. To Weber, before capitalism could fully develop it was necessary to have both the appropriate beliefs, and the appropriate material circumstances. In a simple tribal society neither would be present. According to Weber, many oriental societies had the economic conditions that could have led to capitalism, but they lacked a religion that encouraged rational activity. Countries such as Britain and the USA had both the material conditions and the beliefs of ascetic Protestantism, which were necessary preconditions for the development of capitalism.

Weber – a critique

Weber has undoubtedly made a great contribution to the development of modern sociology, although, like the other classical sociologists, his work has been hotly debated.

A central weakness of Weber's sociology can be identified. He has been accused of 'methodological individualism' – a criticism summed up by David Lee and Howard Newby in the following way: 'Weber was willing to treat all social forces and pressures as if they could be explained (or reduced) to the actions and purposes of seemingly isolated individuals' (Lee and Newby, 1983). The structural approaches examined earlier, particularly those of Durkheim and Marx, were strongly opposed to any such view. Furthermore, in Weber's own work, his social action approach exists rather uneasily alongside his views on particular types of social institution. Thus it is hard to reconcile his view that bureaucracies could severely restrict human freedom, or that society was divided into social classes, with his claim that society simply consisted of individuals choosing courses of action according to their motives.

Weber's views on bureaucracy and the importance of rationalization to the development of modernity have been the subject of extensive discussion. Postmodernists generally argue that bureaucratic organizations are no longer the dominant institutions in contemporary societies. They believe that

organizations have become much more flexible, less governed by rules and less hierarchical. For example, Stewart Clegg (1992) argues that post-Fordist flexible firms are far less rigid than traditional bureaucracies. He sees the trend towards this type of work organization as evidence of a shift towards postmodern organizations (see pp. 713–17 for a discussion of post-Fordism and flexible firms).

From a different perspective, some interpreters of Weber have argued that there are reasons to suppose that bureaucratic domination is not inevitable even within modern societies. Thus Larry Ray and Michael Reed (1994) believe that the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy can be challenged. Organizations are not always successful in persuading people that what they are doing can be justified simply in terms of its rationality. In modern societies people may question the *ends* that are being pursued rationally.

According to Ray and Reed, such ends would only be regarded as legitimate if people had agreed to them. There were therefore at least two directions in which modern societies could develop: 'the iron cage on the one hand, and the expansion of discursive rational legitimation on the other' (Ray and Reed, 1994). In other words, there could be increasing emphasis on democratic control of organizational ends. If Ray and Reed are correct, then perhaps pessimistic interpretations of the consequences of bureaucracy may be misplaced or exaggerated.

Whatever the merits of Weber's views on bureaucracy, they have proved enormously influential. His views have shaped much of the debate within the sociology of organizations, and his claims about rationalization have been central to debates about modernity and postmodernity (see pp. 1068–75 for a discussion of modernity and postmodernity).

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism (usually referred to as interactionism in earlier chapters) is a distinctly American branch of sociology. It developed from the work of a group of American philosophers who included John Dewey, William I. Thomas and George Herbert Mead. Like Max Weber, symbolic interactionists are concerned with explaining social actions in terms of the meanings that individuals give to them. However, they tend to focus on small-scale interaction situations rather than large-scale social change.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is generally regarded as the founder of symbolic interactionism. His views will now be examined.

George Herbert Mead

Symbols

In Mead's view, human thought, experience and conduct are essentially social (Mead, 1934). They owe their nature to the fact that human beings interact in terms of symbols, the most important of which are contained in language. A symbol does not simply stand for an object or event: it defines them in a particular way and indicates a response to them. Thus the symbol 'chair' not only represents a class of objects and defines them as similar, it also indicates a line of action: that is, the action of sitting.

Symbols impose particular meanings on objects and events and, in doing so, largely exclude other possible meanings. For example, chairs may be made out of metal, cane or wood, and on this basis be defined as very different objects. However, such differences are rendered insignificant by the fact that they are all categorized in terms of the symbol 'chair'. Similarly, chairs can be stood on, used as a source of fuel or as a means for assaulting someone; but the range of possible activities that could be associated with chairs is largely excluded by the course of action indicated by the symbol 'chair'. Symbols provide the means whereby humans can interact meaningfully with their natural and social environment. They are human-made and refer not to the intrinsic nature of objects and events but to the ways in which people perceive them.

Without symbols there would be no human interaction and no human society. Symbolic interaction is necessary since humans have no instincts to direct their behaviour. Humans are not genetically programmed to react automatically to particular stimuli. In order to survive they must therefore construct and live within a world of meaning. For example, they must classify the natural environment into categories of food and non-food in order to meet basic nutritional requirements. In this way humans define both the stimuli and their response to them. Thus, when hunters on the African savannah categorize antelope as a source of food, they define what is significant in the natural environment and their response to it. Via symbols, meaning is imposed on the world of nature, and human interaction with that world is thereby made possible.

Role-taking

Social life can only proceed if the meanings of symbols are largely shared by members of society. If this were not the case, meaningful communication would be impossible. However, common symbols provide only the means by which human interaction can be accomplished. In order for interaction to proceed each person involved must interpret the meanings and intentions of others. This is made possible by the existence of common symbols, but actually accomplished by means of a process that Mead termed 'role-taking'.

The process of role-taking involves one person taking on the role of another by imaginatively placing themselves in the position of the person with whom they are interacting. For example, if a person observes another smiling, crying, waving a hand or shaking a fist, they will put themselves in that person's position in order to interpret the intention and meaning. On the basis of this interpretation they will make their response to the action of the other. Thus, if an individual observes someone shaking a fist, they may interpret this gesture as an indication of aggression but their interpretation will not automatically lead to a particular response. They may ignore the gesture, respond in kind, attempt to defuse the situation with a joke, and so on. The person with whom they are interacting will then take their role, interpret their response and either continue or close the interaction on the basis of this interpretation. In this respect human interaction can be seen as a continuous process of interpretation, with each taking the role of the other.

The self

Mead argued that, through the process of role-taking, individuals develop a concept of 'self'. By placing themselves in the position of others they are able to look back upon themselves. Mead claimed that the idea of a self can only develop if the individual can 'get outside himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself'. To do this they must observe themselves from the standpoint of others. Therefore, the origin and development of a concept of self lie in the ability to take the role of another.

Mead distinguished two aspects of the self. The 'me' is your definition of yourself in a specific social role. For example, you might see yourself as a 'good parent' or a 'loyal friend'. The 'I' is your opinion of yourself as a whole. The 'I', which can also be called your 'self-concept', is built up from the reactions of others to you, and the way you interpret those reactions. It can exercise considerable influence over your behaviour. For example, if you see yourself as cowardly on the basis of the self-concept you have built up, you are unlikely to act bravely in dangerous situations.

The notion of self is not inborn, it is learned during childhood. Mead saw two main stages in its development. The first, known as the play stage, involves children playing roles that are not their own. For example, children may play at being a parent, a doctor or a nurse. In doing so they become aware that there is a difference between themselves and the role they are playing. Thus the idea of a self is developed as the child takes the role of a make-believe other.

The second stage in the development of self is known as the game stage. In playing a game, children come to see themselves from the perspective of the various participants. In order to play a game such as football or cricket, children must become aware of their relationship to the other players. They must place themselves in the roles of the others in order to appreciate their own particular role in the game. In doing so, they see themselves in terms of the collective viewpoint of the other players. In Mead's terminology, they see themselves from the perspective of 'the generalized other'.

In Mead's view, the development of a consciousness of self is an essential part of the process of becoming a human being. It provides the basis for thought and action, and the foundation for human society. Without an awareness of self, the individual could not direct action or respond to the actions of others. Only by acquiring a concept of self can the individual take the role of self. In this way, thought is possible, since in Mead's view the process of thinking is simply an 'inner conversation'. Thus, unless individuals are aware of the self, they will be unable to converse with themselves and thought will be impossible.

By becoming 'self-conscious', people can direct their own action by thought and deliberation. They can set goals for themselves, plan future action and consider the consequences of alternative courses of action. With an awareness of self, individuals are able to see themselves as others see them. When they take the role of others, they observe themselves from that standpoint and become aware of the views of themselves that others hold.

This provides the basis for cooperative action in society. Individuals will become aware of what is expected of them and will tend to modify their actions accordingly. They will be conscious of the general attitudes of the community, and judge and evaluate themselves in terms of this generalized other. From this perspective, thought becomes 'an inner conversation going on between this generalized other and the individual'. Thus people are constantly asking what other people will think and expect when they reflect upon themselves. In this way conduct is regulated in terms of the expectations and attitudes of others. Mead argued that 'It is in the form of the

generalized other that the social process influences the behaviour of the individuals involved in it ... that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members.'

Culture, social roles and institutions

Mead accepted that a society has a culture, and that this culture suggests appropriate types of behaviour for particular social roles. For example, a culture might specify that the role of doctor should not involve anything that might harm patients. People will tend to act in ways that are consistent both with the expected behaviour in a particular role, and with that person's concept of self. From Mead's point of view, social institutions such as the family or the state have an existence, in the sense that particular social roles are attached to them. Thus the institution 'the family' consists of the social roles of mother, father, daughter, son, sister, brother and so on.

Although the existence of a culture and social roles does shape human behaviour to some extent, humans still have considerable choice as to how they behave. Mead gave a number of reasons why this is so:

1 Many cultural expectations are not specific. Society may, for example, demand that people wear clothes, but there is usually considerable freedom as to which clothes to wear.
2 Individuals have considerable choice as to which roles they enter: for example, they have an element of choice in what job they do.
3 Some social roles encourage a diversity of behaviour: for example, fashion designers are encouraged to develop novel designs.
4 Society does not have an all-embracing culture. Subcultures exist and people can choose which of them to join.
5 Many cultural meanings indicate possibilities rather than requirements. Thus the symbol 'chair' suggests the possibility that people can sit on the object, but they are not compelled to do so.
6 At times it may be impossible to act in accordance with a social role: for example, parents may find themselves unable to care adequately for their children. In such circumstances new and innovative behaviour is necessary.

Social roles are not therefore fixed or unchanging; in reality they are constantly being modified in the course of interaction.

The individual and society

Mead's view of human interaction sees humans as both actively creating the social environment and being shaped by it. Individuals initiate and direct their own action while at the same time being influenced by the attitudes and expectations of others in the form of the generalized other. The individual and society are regarded as inseparable, for the individual can only become a human being in a social context. In this context individuals develop a sense of self, which is a prerequisite for thought. They learn to take the roles of others, which is essential both for the development of self and for cooperative action. Without communication in terms of symbols whose meanings are shared, these processes would not be possible. Humanity therefore lives in a world of symbols that give meaning and significance to life and provide the basis for human interaction.

Herbert Blumer

The basic premises of symbolic interactionism

Blumer, a student of George Herbert Mead, systematically developed the ideas of his mentor (Blumer, 1962). In Blumer's view, symbolic interactionism rests on three basic premises:

1 Human beings act on the basis of meanings that they give to objects and events, rather than simply reacting either to external stimuli such as social forces, or to internal stimuli such as organic drives. Symbolic interactionism therefore rejects both societal and biological determinism.
2 Meanings arise from the process of interaction rather than simply being present at the outset and shaping future action. To some degree, meanings are created, modified, developed and changed within interaction situations rather than being fixed and pre-formed. In the process of interaction actors do not slavishly follow pre-set norms or mechanically act out established roles.
3 Meanings are the result of interpretive procedures employed by actors within interaction contexts. By taking the role of the other, actors interpret the meanings and intentions of others. By means of 'the mechanism of self-interaction', individuals modify or change their definition of the situation, rehearse alternative courses of action and consider their possible consequences. Thus the meanings that guide action arise in the context of interaction via a series of complex interpretive procedures.

Blumer argues that the interactionist perspective contrasts sharply with the view of social action presented by mainstream sociology. He maintains that society must be seen as an ongoing process of interaction, involving actors who are constantly adjusting to one another and continuously interpreting the situation. By contrast, mainstream sociology, and functionalism in particular, have tended to portray action as a mechanical response to the constraints of social systems. This view fails to see 'the social actions of individuals in human society as being constructed

by them through a process of interpretation. Instead action is treated as a product of factors which play on and through individuals.' Rather than actively creating their own social world, humans are pictured as passively responding to external constraints. Their actions are shaped by the needs of social systems and the values, roles and norms that form a part of those systems. Blumer rejects this view, arguing that:

> *the likening of human group life to the operation of a mechanical structure, or to the functioning of a system seeking equilibrium, seems to me to face grave difficulties in view of the formative and explorative character of interaction as the participants judge each other and guide their own acts by that judgement.*
>
> Blumer, 1962

Social action and social systems

Although he is critical of those who see action as a predictable and standardized response to external constraints, Blumer accepts that action is to some degree structured and routinized. He states that 'In most situations in which people act towards one another they have in advance a firm understanding of how to act and how other people will act.' However, such knowledge offers only general guidelines for conduct. It does not provide a precise and detailed recipe for action that is mechanically followed in every situation. Within these guidelines there is considerable room for manoeuvre, negotiation, mutual adjustment and interpretation.

Similarly, Blumer recognizes the existence of social institutions and admits that they place limits on human conduct; but even in situations where strict rules prevail, such as in bureaucratic organizations, there is still considerable room for human initiative and creativity. Even when action appears particularly standardized and structured, this should not be taken as an indication that actors are merely responding to external forces. Blumer argues that:

> *The common repetitive behaviour of people in such situations should not mislead the student into believing that no process of interpretation is in play; on the contrary, even though fixed, the actions of the participating people are constructed by them through a process of interpretation.*
>
> Blumer, 1962

Thus, standardized action is constructed by social actors, not by social systems.

Much of Blumer's work has been concerned with developing an appropriate methodology for his view of human interaction. This aspect of his work is discussed in Chapter 14 (see p. 973).

Examples of interactionist sociology can be found on pp. 843–9 and 372–9.

Symbolic interactionism – a critique

Interaction in a vacuum

Interactionists have often been accused of examining human interaction in a vacuum. They have tended to focus on small-scale face-to-face interaction, with little concern for its historical or social setting. They have concentrated on particular situations and encounters, with little reference to the historical events leading up to them or the wider social framework in which they occur. Since these factors influence the particular interaction situation, the scant attention they have received has been regarded as a serious omission. Thus, in a criticism of Mead, Ropers argues that 'The activities that he sees men engaged in are not historically determined relationships of social and historical continuity; they are merely episodes, interactions, encounters, and situations' (quoted in Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds, 1975).

The origin of norms

While symbolic interactionism provides a corrective to the excesses of societal determinism, many critics have argued that it has gone too far in this direction. Although they claim that action is not determined by structural norms, interactionists do admit the presence of such norms. However, they tend to take them as given rather than explaining their origin. As William Skidmore (1975) comments, interactionists largely fail to explain 'why people consistently choose to act in given ways in certain situations, instead of in all the other ways they might possibly have acted'.

In stressing the flexibility and freedom of human action, interactionists tend to downplay the constraints on action. In Skidmore's view, this is due to the fact that 'interactionism consistently fails to give an account of social structure'. In other words it fails to adequately explain how standardized normative behaviour comes about and why members of society are motivated to act in terms of social norms.

The source of meanings

Similar criticisms have been made with reference to what many see as the failure of interactionists to explain the source of the meanings to which they attach such importance. As the chapters on education and crime and deviance have shown, interactionism provides little indication of the origins of the meanings in terms of which individuals are labelled by teachers, police and probation officers (see Chapter 11, pp. 843–9, and Chapter 6, pp. 372–9). Critics argue that such meanings are not spontaneously created in interaction situations. Instead they are systematically generated by the social structure.

Thus Marxists have argued that the meanings that operate in face-to-face interaction situations are largely the product of class relationships. From this viewpoint, interactionists have failed to explain the most significant thing about meanings: their origin.

Interactionism and American culture

Symbolic interactionism is a distinctly American branch of sociology and, to some, this partly explains its shortcomings. Thus Leon Shaskolsky (1970) has argued that interactionism is largely a reflection of the cultural ideals of American society. He claims that 'Symbolic interactionism has its roots deeply imbedded in the cultural environment of American life, and its interpretation of society is, in a sense, a "looking glass" image of what that society purports to be.' Thus the emphasis on liberty, freedom and individuality in interactionism can be seen in part as a reflection of America's view of itself.

Shaskolsky argues that this helps to explain why the interactionist perspective finds less support in Europe, since there is a greater awareness in European societies of the constraints of power and class domination. By reflecting American ideals, Shaskolsky argues that interactionism has failed to face up to, and take account of, the harsher realities of social life. Whatever its shortcomings, however, many would agree with William Skidmore that, 'On the positive side, it is clearly true that some of the most fascinating sociology is in the symbolic interactionist tradition' (Skidmore, 1975).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a branch of European philosophy that was first developed by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), and which was developed along more sociological lines by Alfred Schutz (1899–1959). Shutz was a pupil of Husserl's who moved to the USA with the rise of fascism in Europe.

Phenomenology differs from the social action approaches that have been examined so far in that it denies the possibility of explaining social action as such. Its emphasis is upon the internal workings of the human mind and the way that humans classify and make sense of the world around them. It is not concerned with the causal explanation of human behaviour in the same way as other perspectives. Phenomenologists try to understand the meaning of phenomena or things, rather than explaining how they came into existence.

Making sense of sensory experience

According to phenomenologists, individuals only come into contact with the outside world through their senses: touch, smell, hearing, sight and taste. It is not possible to know about the outside world except through these senses. Simply possessing senses, though, is not enough for a person to be able to make any sense out of the world. If humans took their sense experiences at face value, they would be confronted by an unintelligible mass of impressions – of colours, lights, sounds, smells, feelings and tastes that were meaningless.

In order to overcome this problem, humans begin to organize the world around them into phenomena; they classify their sense experiences into things that appear to have common characteristics. For example, a distinction may be made between animate and inanimate objects. This distinction may be refined by dividing animate objects into mammals and non-mammals. Mammals may be divided into different species and species subdivided into different breeds. Thus humans have a series of shorthand ways of classifying and understanding the world external to their own consciousness. For example, a small white animal making a barking noise may be identified as a poodle.

Husserl (1931) did not believe that this process was in any sense objective; the classification of phenomena was entirely a product of the human mind, and could not be evaluated in terms of whether it was true or false. He did not deny the existence of physical objects beyond and outside the human mind, but he argued that, since people could only come into contact with them through their senses, they could never be sure about their true nature. Thus, in trying to secure knowledge, humans had to 'bracket' reality and commonsense beliefs: that is, put them, as it were, inside brackets and forget about whether they were true or false.

Once they had done this, they could turn their attention to a phenomenological understanding of the world. Husserl argued that, in order to understand social life, phenomenologists should study the way that humans placed the external world into categories by distinguishing particular phenomena. In doing so it would be possible to understand the meaning of a phenomenon by discovering its essence. What Husserl meant by this was that the researcher could find the distinguishing features (the essence) of a

group of things (or phenomena) which humans classed together. Thus, for example, it might be found that a distinguishing feature – part of the essence – of a boat, was that it could float.

In Chapter 14 the description of Atkinson's work on suicide (pp. 979–80) shows how he tried to understand the nature of the phenomenon suicide by investigating how coroners distinguished it from other types of death.

Alfred Schutz – the phenomenology of the social world

The general approach adopted by phenomenology is a type of philosophy of knowledge, rather than a sociological perspective. Alfred Schutz (1972, first published 1932) was the first to try to explain how phenomenology could be applied to develop insights into the social world. Schutz's main contribution was to insist that the way that humans classified and attached meaning to the outside world was not a purely individual process. Humans developed what he called 'typifications' – the concepts attached to classes of things that are experienced. Thus, a 'bank manager', a 'football match', 'dusting' and 'a tree', are examples of typifications. These typifications are not unique to each person, but are shared by members of a society. They are passed on to children through learning a language, reading books or speaking to other people.

By the use of typifications, people are able to communicate with others on the basis of the assumption that they see the world in the same way. Gradually, a member of society builds up a stock of what Schutz calls 'common-sense knowledge', which is shared with other members of society and allows humans to live and communicate together. Schutz believes that such knowledge is essential to accomplish practical tasks in everyday life. For example, he describes the way in which a simple act such as posting a letter rests upon commonsense knowledge and the existence of shared typifications. The person posting the letter assumes that another person (a postal worker whom they may never have met) will be able to recognize the piece of paper with writing on it as a letter, and, along with other postal workers, will deliver it to the address on the envelope. People also assume that the recipient of the letter – again someone they might not have met – will have commonsense knowledge similar to their own, and will therefore be able to understand the message, and react in an appropriate way.

Although Schutz stresses that knowledge is shared, he does not think that it is fixed and unchanging. Indeed, commonsense knowledge is constantly modified in the course of human interaction. Schutz acknowledges that each individual has a unique biography, and interprets and experiences the world in slightly different ways; but the existence of a stock of commonsense knowledge allows humans to understand, at least partly, each other's actions. In doing so, they convince themselves that there are regular and ordered patterns in the world, and in social life. From this point of view, humans create between themselves the illusion that there is stability and order in society, when in reality there is simply a jumble of individual experiences that have no clear shape or form.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology was first developed in the 1960s. Many of the concerns of ethnomethodology have reflected the type of approach developed by Schutz. Schutz, however, did not carry out detailed research into social life; he merely speculated about the nature of society. Ethnomethodologists have applied phenomenological ideas in carrying out research.

In 1967 Harold Garfinkel first coined the term 'ethnomethodology'. Roughly translated, ethnomethodology means a study of the methods used by people. It is concerned with the methods used by people (or 'members', as ethnomethodologists refer to them) to construct, account for and give meaning to their social world.

Social order as a fiction

Ethnomethodologists follow Schutz in believing that there is no real social order, as other sociological perspectives assume. Social life appears orderly to members of society only because members actively engage in making sense of social life. Societies have regular and ordered patterns only because members perceive them in this way. Social order therefore becomes a convenient fiction – an appearance of order constructed by members of society. This appearance allows the social world to be described and explained, and so made knowable, reasonable, understandable and accountable to its members. It is made accountable in the sense that members of society become able to provide descriptions and explanations of their own

actions, and of the society around them, that are reasonable and acceptable to themselves and others. Thus, in Atkinson's study of suicide, coroners were able to justify and explain their actions to themselves and to others in terms of the commonsense ways they went about reaching a verdict.

The point of ethnomethodology, according to Zimmerman and Wieder (1971), is to explain 'how members of society go about the task of seeing, describing, and explaining order in the world in which they live'. Ethnomethodologists have therefore conducted investigations into the techniques that are used by members to achieve the appearance of order. Two studies will now be examined in detail to illustrate the above points.

Harold Garfinkel

The documentary method

Garfinkel (1967) argues that members employ the 'documentary method' to make sense of and account for the social world, and to give it an appearance of order. This method consists of selecting certain aspects of the infinite number of features contained in any situation or context, defining them in a particular way, and seeing them as evidence of an underlying pattern. The process is then reversed and particular instances of the underlying pattern are used as evidence for the existence of the pattern. In Garfinkel's words, the documentary method:

> *consists of treating an actual appearance as 'the document of', as 'pointing to', as 'standing on behalf of' a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of 'what is known' about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other.*
>
> Garfinkel, 1967

For example, in the case of Atkinson's study of coroners, those deaths defined as suicide were seen as such by reference to an underlying pattern. This pattern is the coroner's commonsense theory of suicide. However, at the same time, those deaths defined as suicide were seen as evidence for the existence of the underlying pattern. In this way, particular instances of the pattern and the pattern itself are mutually reinforcing and are used to elaborate each other. Thus the documentary method can be seen as 'reflexive'. The particular instance is seen as a reflection of the underlying pattern and vice versa.

Garfinkel argues that social life is 'essentially reflexive'. Members of society constantly look at particular activities and situations in terms of presumed underlying patterns, and in turn confirm the existence of those patterns by referring to particular expressions of them in activities and situations. In this way, members produce accounts of the social world that not only make sense of and explain, but actually constitute, that world. Thus, in providing accounts of suicide, coroners are actually producing suicide. Their accounts of suicide constitute suicide in the social world. In this respect, accounts are a part of the things they describe and explain. The social world is therefore constituted by the methods and accounting procedures in terms of which it is identified, described and explained. Thus the social world is constructed by its members by the use of the documentary method. This is what Garfinkel means when he describes social reality as 'essentially reflexive'.

An experiment in counselling

Garfinkel claims to have demonstrated the documentary method and its reflexive nature by an experiment conducted in a university department of psychiatry. Students were invited to take part in what was described as a new form of psychotherapy. They were asked to summarize a personal problem on which they required advice and then ask a counsellor a series of questions. The counsellor sat in a room adjoining the student; they could not see each other and communicated via an intercom. The counsellor was limited to responses of either 'yes' or 'no'. Unknown to the student, the adviser was not a counsellor and the answers received were evenly divided between 'yes' and 'no', their sequence being predetermined in accordance with a table of random numbers.

In one case a student was worried about his relationship with his girlfriend. He was Jewish and she was a Gentile. He was worried about his parents' reaction to the relationship and the problems that might result from marriage and children. His questions related to these concerns. Despite the fact that the answers he received were random and given without reference to the content of questions, and sometimes contradicted previous answers, the student found them helpful, reasonable and sensible. Similar assessments of the counselling sessions were made by the other students in the experiment.

From comments made by students on each of the answers they received, Garfinkel draws the following conclusions. Students *made* sense of the answers where no sense existed; they imposed an order on the answers where no order was present. When answers appeared contradictory or surprising, the students assumed that the counsellor was unaware of the full facts of their case. The students constructed an appearance of order by using the documentary method. From the first answer they perceived an

underlying pattern in the counsellor's advice. The sense of each following answer was interpreted in terms of the pattern, and at the same time each answer was seen as evidence for the existence of the pattern. Thus the students' method of interpretation was reflexive. Not only did they produce an account of the counselling session, but the account became a part of, and so constituted, the session. In this way the accounting procedure described and explained, and also constructed and constituted social reality at one and the same time.

Garfinkel claims that the counselling experiment highlights and captures the procedures that members are constantly using to construct the social world in their everyday lives.

Indexicality

This experiment can also be used to illustrate the idea of 'indexicality', a central concept employed by Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists. Indexicality means that the sense of any object or activity is derived from its context; it is 'indexed' in a particular situation. As a result any interpretation, explanation or account made by members in their everyday lives is made with reference to particular circumstances and situations. Thus the students' sense of the counsellor's answers was derived from the context of the interaction. From the setting – a psychiatry department – and the information they were given, the students believed that the counsellor was what he claimed to be and that he was doing his best to give honest and sound advice. His answers were interpreted within the framework of this context. If identical answers were received from fellow students in a coffee bar, the change of context would probably result in a very different interpretation. Such responses from fellow students might have been seen as evidence that they had temporarily taken leave of their senses, or were having a joke at their friend's expense, or they were drunk and so on.

Garfinkel argues that the sense of any action is achieved by reference to its context. Members' sense of what is happening depends on the way they interpret the context of the activity concerned. In this respect their understanding and accounts are indexical: they make sense in terms of particular settings.

Disrupting the social world

Garfinkel encouraged his students actually to disrupt the social world in order to reveal the way that members made sense of it and reached understandings. For example, he suggested they go into supermarkets and haggle over the price of goods, or go back to their own homes and act as if they were lodgers. In such ways they would demonstrate the fragile nature of social order. The victims of these experiments found it difficult or impossible to index them in the situation in which they took place. Thus parents, faced with a child acting as a lodger in their own home, became perplexed or angry, and desperately tried to make sense of their child's actions by, for example, believing that the child must be ill.

Don H. Zimmerman – 'The practicalities of rule use'

As indicated earlier in this chapter, Weber placed great emphasis on the importance of rules in bureaucracies (see pp. 1051–5). The bureaucrat is usually seen as strictly conforming to formal rules or else acting in terms of a system of informal rules. In either case the behaviour is seen to be governed by rules. Zimmerman's study suggests an alternative perspective (Zimmerman, 1971). Rather than seeing behaviour as governed by rules, Zimmerman suggests that members employ rules to describe and account for their activity. Part of this activity may be in direct violation of a stated rule, yet it is still justified with reference to the rule. This paradox will be explained shortly.

Rules and rule violations

Zimmerman studied behaviour in a US Bureau of Public Assistance. Clients applying for assistance were assigned to caseworkers by receptionists. Officially, the assignment procedure was conducted in terms of a simple rule. If there were four caseworkers, the first four clients who arrived were assigned one to each caseworker. The next four clients were assigned in a similar manner, providing the second interview of the day for each caseworker, and so on. However, from time to time the rule was broken. For example, a particular caseworker may have had a difficult case and the interview may have lasted far longer than usual. In this situation a receptionist might reorganize the assignment list and switch the next client to another caseworker.

Justifying rule violations

Such rule violations were justified and explained by the receptionists in terms of the rule. In their eyes, by breaking the rule they were conforming to the rule. This paradox can be explained by the receptionists' view of the intention of the rule. From their viewpoint, the rule was meant to keep clients moving with a minimum of delay, so that all had been attended to at the end of the day. Thus, violating the rule to ensure this outcome can be explained as following the rule. This was the way the receptionists justified and explained their conduct to themselves and to their fellow workers. By seeing their activity as conforming to a rule, they created an appearance of order.

However, rather than simply being directed by rules, Zimmerman argues that the receptionists were constantly monitoring and assessing the situation and improvising and adapting their conduct in terms of what they saw as the requirements of the situation. Zimmerman claims that his research indicates that 'the actual practices of using rules do not permit an analyst to account for regular patterns of behaviour by invoking the notion that these practices occur because members of society are following rules'. He argues that the use of rules by members to describe and account for their conduct 'makes social settings appear orderly for the participants and it is this *sense and appearance* of order that rules in use, in fact, provide and what the ethnomethodologists in fact study'.

Zimmerman's research highlights some of the main concerns of ethnomethodology. It provides an example of the documentary method and illustrates the reflexive nature of the procedures used by members to construct an appearance of order. The receptionists interpreted their activity as evidence of an underlying pattern – the intent of the rule – and they saw particular actions, even when they violated the rules, as evidence of the underlying pattern.

Ethnomethodology and mainstream sociology

Garfinkel (1967) argues that mainstream sociology has typically portrayed man as a 'cultural dope' who simply acts out the standardized directives provided by the culture of his society. Garfinkel states that, 'By "cultural dope" I refer to the man-in-the-sociologist's-society who produces the stable features of society by acting in compliance with preestablished and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides.' In place of the 'cultural dope', the ethnomethodologist pictures the skilled member who is constantly attending to the particular, indexical qualities of situations, giving them meaning, making them knowable, communicating this knowledge to others and constructing a sense and appearance of order. From this perspective, members construct and accomplish their own social world rather than being shaped by it.

The nature of social reality

Ethnomethodologists are highly critical of other branches of sociology. They argue that 'conventional' sociologists have misunderstood the nature of social reality. They have treated the social world as if it has an objective reality that is independent of members' accounts and interpretations. Thus they have regarded aspects of the social world such as suicide and crime as facts with an existence of their own. They have then attempted to provide explanations for these 'facts'. By contrast, ethnomethodologists argue that the social world consists of nothing more than the constructs, interpretations and accounts of its members. The job of the sociologist is therefore to explain the methods and accounting procedures that members employ to construct their social world. According to ethnomethodologists, this is the very job that mainstream sociology has failed to do.

The documentary method and mainstream sociology

Ethnomethodologists see little difference between conventional sociologists and the person in the street. They argue that the methods employed by sociologists in their research are basically similar to those used by members of society in their everyday lives. Members employing the documentary method are constantly theorizing, drawing relationships between activities and making the social world appear orderly and systematic. They then treat the social world as if it had an objectivity separate from themselves. Ethnomethodologists argue that the procedures of conventional sociologists are essentially similar. They employ the documentary method, theorize and draw relationships, and construct a picture of an orderly and systematic social system. They operate reflexively like any other member of society. Thus, when functionalists see behaviour as an expression of an underlying pattern of shared values, they also use instances of that behaviour as evidence for the existence of the pattern. By means of their accounting procedures, members construct a picture of society. In this sense the person in the street is their own sociologist. Ethnomethodologists see little to choose between the pictures of society that people create and those provided by conventional sociologists.

Ethnomethodology – a critique

Alvin Gouldner (1971) pours scorn upon ethnomethodology for dealing with trivial aspects of social life, and revealing things that everybody knows already. He gives an example of the type of experiment advocated by Garfinkel. An ethnomethodologist might release chickens in a town centre during the rush hour, and stand back and observe as traffic was held up and crowds gathered to watch and laugh at police officers chasing the chickens. Gouldner goes on to explain that Garfinkel might say that the community has now learned the importance of one hitherto unnoticed rule at the basis of everyday life: chickens must not be dropped in the streets in the midst of the rush hour.

More seriously, critics have argued that the members who populate the kind of society portrayed

by ethnomethodologists appear to lack any motives and goals. As Anthony Giddens remarks, there is little reference to 'the pursuance of practical goals or interests' (Giddens, 1977). What, for example, motivated the students in Garfinkel's counselling experiment or the receptionists in Zimmerman's study? There is little indication in the writings of ethnomethodologists as to why people want to behave or are made to behave in particular ways. Nor is there much consideration of the nature of power in the social world and the possible effects of differences in power on members' behaviour. As Gouldner notes:

> *The process by which social reality becomes defined and established is not viewed by Garfinkel as entailing a process of struggle among competing groups' definitions of reality, and the outcome, the common-sense conception of the world, is not seen as having been shaped by institutionally protected power differences.*
>
> Gouldner, 1971

Critics have argued that ethnomethodologists have failed to give due consideration to the fact that members' accounting procedures are conducted within a system of social relationships involving differences in power. Many ethnomethodologists appear to dismiss everything that is not recognized and accounted for by members of society. They imply that, if members do not recognize the existence of objects and events, they are unaffected by them. But, as John H. Goldthorpe pointedly remarks in his criticism of ethnomethodology, 'if for instance, it is bombs and napalm that are zooming down, members do not have to be oriented towards them in any particular way, or at all, in order to be killed by them' (Goldthorpe, 1973). Clearly members do not have to recognize certain constraints in order for their behaviour to be affected by them. As Goldthorpe notes, with reference to the above example, death 'limits interaction in a fairly decisive way'.

Finally, the ethnomethodologists' criticism of mainstream sociology can be redirected towards themselves. As Giddens remarks, 'any ethnomethodological account must display the same characteristics as it claims to discern in the accounts of lay actors'. Ethnomethodologists' accounting procedures therefore become a topic of study like those of conventional sociologists or any other member of society. In theory, the process of accounting for accounts is never-ending. Carried to its extreme, the ethnomethodological position implies that nothing is ever knowable.

Whatever its shortcomings, however, ethnomethodology asks interesting questions.

Uniting structural and social action approaches

The earlier parts of this chapter have shown how sociology can be divided into two types of approach. Structural approaches, such as functionalism and some versions of Marxism, emphasize the way that the structure of society directs human behaviour. Social action or interpretive approaches (such as those advocated by Weber), and symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists, argue that humans create society through their own actions. This distinction is not neat and clearcut: most perspectives in sociology show some concern with both social structure and social action; but most perspectives emphasize one aspect of social life at the expense of another.

However, many sociologists have argued that it would be desirable to produce a sociological theory that combined an understanding of social structure and social action. C. Wright Mills, for example, claimed that 'The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals' (Mills, 1959). It has often seemed as though sociologists could only understand one of these elements at a time. They might try to understand the 'larger historical scene' using a structural perspective; or alternatively they might try to understand the life of individuals using a social action approach. Generally they do not attempt to understand both simultaneously.

Anthony Giddens – the theory of structuration

The duality of structure

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1977, 1979, 1984) has attempted to overcome the division between structure and action. Although the details of his argument are complex, his basic point is simple. Giddens claims that structure and action are two sides of the same coin. Neither structure nor action can exist independently; both are intimately related. Social actions create structures, and it is through social actions that structures are produced and reproduced, so that they survive over time. Indeed he uses a single word, 'structuration', to describe the way that structures relate to social

actions, so that certain sets of social relationships survive over space and time (Giddens, 1984). Giddens talks about the 'duality of structure', to suggest both that structures make social action possible, and at the same time that social action creates those very structures. He says that 'structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity'. In other words, it is you, I, and every other individual, that create structures.

The clearest way that Giddens explains this is using the examples of language and speech. The English language is, to Giddens, a structure; it is a set of rules about how to communicate, which seems independent of any individual. The grammar and vocabulary of English cannot simply be changed at will by members of society. Yet, if the language is to be reproduced, if it is to survive, it must be spoken or written by individuals in ways that follow its existing rules. Thus, Giddens says, 'when I utter a grammatical English sentence I contribute to the reproduction of the English language as a whole'.

The structure of the language ultimately depends upon the people who use it. For the most part, competent English speakers will follow the rules of English and reproduction will take place. However, this is not inevitable. Languages change: new words are invented and accepted by being used; some old words are forgotten and fall into disuse. Human agents, by their actions, can therefore transform as well as reproduce structures.

Rules and resources

In social life in general, Giddens identifies two aspects of structure: 'rules' and 'resources'.

Rules are procedures that individuals may follow in their social life. Sometimes interpretations of these rules are written down: for example, in the form of laws or bureaucratic rules. Such written expressions are not the rules themselves. Thus a rule might state that shopping involves paying a shop assistant; while the written interpretation of a rule of this sort might be the law of theft. Such structural rules can either be reproduced by members of society or they can be changed through the development of new patterns of interaction.

The second aspect of structure, resources, also come into being through human actions and can be changed or maintained by them. Resources take two forms: allocative and authoritative.

'Allocative resources' include raw materials, land, technology, instruments of production and goods. For Giddens, such resources are never just there, given by nature; they only become resources through human actions. Thus land is not a resource until someone farms it or puts it to some other use.

'Authoritative resources' are non-material resources that result from some individuals being able to dominate others. In other words, they involve the ability to get others to carry out a person's wishes, and in this way humans become a resource that other individuals may be able to use. As in other parts of his theory, Giddens insists that authoritative resources only exist in so far as they are produced by human interaction. Authority is not something a person has unless they are actually using it.

Social systems

Having discussed what he means by structure, Giddens goes on to explain what he sees as the nature of social systems and institutions. A social system, he argues, is simply a pattern of social relations that exists over a period of time and space. Thus, for example, nineteenth-century Britain is a social system because it was a geographically defined space, over a particular period of time, where there were certain reproduced sets of social relationships and social practices. Of course, Giddens would not believe that Britain was the same 'system' in 1899 as it was in 1801; social relationships and practices would have changed continually as patterns of interaction changed. Similarly, institutions such as the state or bureaucracies are seen by Giddens as patterns of behaviour that display some continuity over time, but which may also change as time passes.

Agency and reproduction

Giddens's views on structures, systems and institutions are closely tied in with his idea of human action (or 'agency' as he usually refers to it) since they are all part of the 'duality of structure'. According to Giddens, human agents are constantly intervening in the world by their actions, and in doing so they have the capacity to transform it. He would not, though, accept the view that individuals just create society, any more than he would accept that society determines individual behaviour. Structure affects human behaviour because of the knowledge that agents have about their own society. There is a large stock of 'mutual knowledge' of 'how to go on', or 'how to get things done'.

From what they have learnt, agents know how to go about their everyday lives and accomplish objectives. For example, 'competent' members of society know how to go to a bar and order a round of drinks, just as other competent members know how to serve the customer ordering the drinks. Routine, mundane behaviour like this is constantly carried out and much of it requires little thought. This is so because the agents involved are drawing upon their knowledge of the rules of society, which exist in the structure of society. At the same time

they are making use of resources that are also part of the structure of society. They make use of material commodities – like money, drinks and glasses – and authoritative resources, such as the right of the bar staff to demand payment – a right that is recognized by the customers.

Giddens seems to think that humans have a basic desire for some degree of predictability in social life. They have a need for what he calls 'ontological security' or 'confidence and trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be'. He suggests tentatively that this may be connected to the human 'basic security system', essentially a natural concern with the physical survival of the body. Thus it would be unsettling if people did not know whether they were expected to have to give money to, or take money from, bar staff, and even more unsettling if they were to worry that the bar staff were not what they seemed, and were a group of mass murderers intent upon poisoning their customers.

Agency and transformation

According to Giddens, the existence of mutual knowledge, and a need for ontological security, tend to produce regulations in social life. Patterns of behaviour are repeated, and in this way the structure of society, the social system and the institutions are all reproduced. However, this whole process also involves the ever-present possibility that society can be changed. Agents do not have to behave as others do, nor do they necessarily act in accordance with their habits forever. Giddens describes 'the reflexive monitoring of actions' in which humans are constantly able to think about what they are doing and consider whether their objectives are being achieved. If they are not being achieved, then agents may start to behave in new ways, patterns of interaction may change, and with them the social structure.

For Giddens the very concepts of 'agent' and 'agency' involve people having the ability to transform the world around them through their actions, as well as being able to reproduce it. That does not mean that agents necessarily transform society, or for that matter reproduce it in ways that they intend. Human actions may well have consequences that were not anticipated by the agents involved. He gives the example of going home and switching on a light in order to illuminate a room. An unintended consequence of this might be that a burglar is alerted and flees the house, and in doing so is apprehended by the police, and ultimately ends up spending several years in prison. Such unintended consequences can also result in patterns of social life that were not necessarily intended to be produced by any individual. Thus, for example, decisions by individuals in society about where to live might produce a situation, which nobody had actually intended, in which some inner-city areas start to decay and develop a concentration of social problems.

Determinism and voluntarism

In his theory of the duality of structure, Giddens tries to show how the traditional distinction between social structure and social action does not necessitate seeing society in terms of one or the other: structure and agency are locked together in the processes through which social life is reproduced and transformed. In a similar fashion, he tries to resolve the dispute between determinists – who believe that human behaviour is entirely determined by outside forces – and voluntarists – who believe that humans possess free will, and can act as they wish. Giddens believes neither theory to be true, but he sees both as having some element of truth. He believes that only in very exceptional circumstances are humans completely constrained.

Complete constraint only occurs where physical force is used – for example, where a person is unwillingly knocked to the ground by someone else. In all other circumstances, even where people claim to 'have no choice', there are options open to them. Thus, if a person holds a gun to someone's head and threatens to shoot them if they do not hand over some money, the option of refusing is still open, even though there is a risk of death by making that choice. In other words it is nearly always possible to 'do otherwise', to do something different. Constraints, according to Giddens, do not therefore determine actions, but operate 'by placing limits upon the range of options open to an actor'.

In society humans are constrained by the existence of power relationships. Giddens sees all social action as involving power relationships. He sees power as the ability to make a difference, to change things from what they would otherwise have been, or, as he puts it, 'transformative capacity'. For him, the idea of human agency involves the idea of transformation capacity, and this capacity of power may be used to change things, or the actions of other people. It can therefore be used to exercise power over other people, and so constrain people and reduce their freedom. At the same time, though, power also increases the freedom of action of the agents who possess it. What restricts one person, enables another to do more.

Most of Giddens's work is highly abstract, and he offers few examples of how his theory of structuration could be applied to the study of society. However, he does praise Paul Willis's book *Learning to Labour* (1977). (For details of the study, see pp. 791–4.) Giddens claims that Willis's work shows how structures can be actively reproduced by the action of

agents as an unintended consequence of the actions. Thus, by their rejection of school and their determination to do manual jobs, 'the lads' in Willis's study reproduce some general features of capitalist-industrial labour. Furthermore, constraints are not simply experienced as external forces of which they are passive recipients. Instead 'the lads' are actively involved in making the decisions that come to constrain them. Because they choose not to work hard at school, they end up with very limited options in later life when they are choosing what work to do.

Giddens claims that, if sociology is to progress beyond the division between action and structure, it requires more studies like Willis's, which show how structures are reproduced by purposeful human agents.

Criticisms of Giddens

Although Giddens's ideas are still developing, they have been the subject of some criticism. Margaret S. Archer (1982) criticizes Giddens for locking agency and structure too tightly together. She suggests that the concepts have different implications. The idea of structure tends to stress the limits on human action; the idea of agency stresses the existence of free will; and the two are never reconciled. In her view, Giddens puts too much emphasis on the ability of agents to transform structures simply by changing their behaviour. Giddens's work implies that, if people were to start acting differently tomorrow, then all of society's structures would immediately be changed.

According to Archer this is not the case. The possibilities for changing social structures, and the extent to which humans have the ability to transform the social world, depend upon the nature of the social structures. She uses the example of Fidel Castro's policy on illiteracy when he took power in Cuba. He wanted to conquer illiteracy by getting each literate person to teach an illiterate to read. Archer points out that literacy could not be achieved overnight, and, furthermore, how quickly it could be achieved depended upon a structural feature of Cuban society: the percentage of the population who were literate. Thus, if 1 per cent of the population were literate, a much more lengthy period would be involved than if 50 per cent of the population were literate. This demonstrates to Archer that structural features of society cannot just be changed at will, at least not on the time scale that the actors involved might wish for.

Archer similarly takes Giddens to task for suggesting that 'material resources' only enter social life and exercise a constraining influence on social actions when humans choose to make use of them. For example, a flood or volcanic eruption, or a shortage of land, is not the product of human will, but it exercises a real, material constraint on options, regardless of human actions. To give another example, once all the coal in the ground has been burned, it cannot be burned again.

In short, Archer suggests that people cannot just change or reproduce society as they wish. Some structural features of society are beyond their control and constrain behaviour. She accepts that humans have both some degree of freedom and some limits on how they act, but a theory that does not move beyond this generalization says little. Giddens notes both the possibility of freedom of action and social change, and the constraints and the reproduction of social institutions. What Giddens does not do, though, is explain which of these will happen in particular circumstances. Archer says, 'The theory of structuration remains incomplete because it provides an insufficient account of the mechanisms of stable replication versus the genesis of new social forms.'

Modernity, postmodernity and postmodernism

Introduction

The distinction between modernity and postmodernity and the theory of postmodernism have become increasingly important in recent times. Theorists such as Durkheim, Weber and Marx have been seen by some as epitomizing modern sociology. Modern theories claimed to be able to provide a comprehensive and definitive theory of society. Postmodern theorists deny that this is possible.

Before considering these issues in detail, it is useful to distinguish between modern theories and postmodernism on the one hand, and theories of modernity and postmodernity on the other.

Modern theories and postmodernism use different *theoretical approaches* to studying sociology. For example, modern sociological theory, such as that of Weber, Marx and Durkheim, believes that it is possible to find out the objective truth about society, whereas postmodernism does not.

Modernity and postmodernity are terms used to describe different eras in the development of human societies. While some people believe that Western societies have moved from modernity to postmodernity, others do not agree. Thus the debate about modernity, postmodernity, modernism and postmodernism is a debate both about the extent to which

society has changed *and* about the sort of theoretical approach that should be used in sociology.

This section will first examine what is meant by the idea of modernity before going on to consider theories of postmodernity and postmodernism. It will conclude by considering the arguments of sociologists who believe that modern sociological theories and theories of modernity remain preferable to postmodernism and theories of postmodernity.

Modernity

Pre-modern and modern

Many of the classic nineteenth-century sociologists, such as Comte, Durkheim, Weber and Marx, shared a common intellectual interest in the social changes associated with industrialization. They all saw these changes as having shaped modernity. Comte and Weber, in particular, saw such changes as involving the progressive triumph of scientific rationality. Comte believed that modern society would be dominated by science. The influence of religion, superstition and philosophy would be replaced by 'positivist' science (see p. 469). Weber believed that the modern age would be increasingly shaped by rationalization and bureaucracy as affective and traditional actions became less important (see pp. 1051–5). Marx and Durkheim put less emphasis on scientific and rational thinking, but both had strong beliefs that society was developing progressively: in Marx's case, towards a communist utopia (see p. 1046); in Durkheim's case, towards a complex society based upon organic solidarity (see pp. 691–3). All of them believed that they had used scientific analysis to uncover the big story (called 'metanarrative' by some postmodernists) of human development. All thought they could outline the future direction of social change.

The belief in progress and the faith placed in science can both be seen as characteristic of modern thinking. Many sociologists would suggest that in pre-modern societies, such as simple tribal societies, religion, superstition and tradition formed the basis of social life. There was little conception of social change as progressive. Instead, following the seasons, social change was seen as circular (see pp. 7–8 for a description of pre-modern societies).

The Enlightenment

Modern ways of thinking are usually seen as having their origins in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. This was a broad European intellectual movement that sought to sweep away the prejudices of previous generations, and replace them with a more rational basis for social life. David Harvey, a commentator on postmodernism, describes the Enlightenment in the following way:

> *The idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by many individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life. The scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural calamity. The development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion, superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures.*
>
> Harvey, 1990, p. 12

The hopes of Enlightenment thinkers were reflected in the French Revolution, and inherited by the nineteenth-century sociologists mentioned above.

Postmodernism and the Enlightenment

Postmodern theorists tend to argue that the Enlightenment 'project' (the aims of Enlightenment thinkers) has been abandoned in contemporary societies. People no longer believe in the inevitability of progress, the power of science to solve all problems, the perfectibility of humanity or the possibility of running societies in a rational way. People are more pessimistic about the future and much less willing to believe that the truth can be found in grand theories or ideologies such as Marxism. There is now a much wider variety of beliefs and most people are unwilling to accept that one set of ideas gives the absolute truth and all others are false. They see no simple recipe for solving the world's problems. Postmodernists welcome these changes.

Postmodernism and architecture

These changes are reflected in architecture, where the term postmodernism was first adopted. Modern architecture was characterized by the use of new, cheap and efficient materials to mass-produce housing or offices for urban populations. The application of scientific knowledge, using such materials as steel, concrete and glass, would enable problems of accommodating people to be solved. The Swiss-born modern architect Le Corbusier saw architecture as producing 'machines for modern living'. He advocated the building of the type of functional high-rise tower block that was to become a common feature of towns and cities throughout the world. However, by the 1970s, tower blocks were beginning to fall out of favour. Charles Jencks (quoted in Harvey, 1990) dates the end of modernism in architecture from the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St Louis in 1972.

According to some theorists, modern architecture has given way to postmodern architecture. This

distrusts the scientific and idealistic approach of modern architecture and, instead of looking to a high-tech future, borrows from the past. According to Harvey, examples of postmodern architecture include 'imitation medieval squares and fishing villages, custom-designed or vernacular housing, renovated factories and warehouses, and rehabilitated landscapes of all kinds'. Prince Charles's denunciations of modern architecture for defacing cities such as London can be seen as a typical postmodern attitude.

According to the theory of postmodernism, we have lost faith in all grand plans for the future of humanity, not just in architecture but in all areas of social life. Diversity is the order of the day. We have entered an era in which anything goes, all styles and fashions are permissible so long as none is taken too seriously. If this is true, then it seems to challenge the assumptions on which the foundations of sociology were laid.

The next sections will outline the claims of some postmodern theorists in more detail, starting with those who give strongest support to the concept and its implications. These writers do not just believe that we have entered an era of postmodernity, they also believe that all modern theories of society are unacceptable and outdated.

Jean-François Lyotard – postmodernism and knowledge

Language-games

The French theorist Lyotard (1984) argues that post-industrial society and postmodern culture began to develop at the end of the 1950s, although the rate of development and the stage reached vary between and within countries. Lyotard sees these developments as related to technology, science and some social developments, but, most importantly, to changes in language. The key concept he uses is that of 'language-games'. Lyotard seems to see social life as being organized around these language-games. Language-games serve to justify or legitimate people's behaviour in society. They are games in which the participants can try to assert certain things to be true or right. Each statement or utterance is a 'move' that may aid the participant in trying to win the game – to get their version of what is true or right accepted.

Narrative

In simple or pre-industrial societies such as the South American tribe Cashinahua, narrative – the telling of stories, myths, legends and tales – is the principal language-game. The narrator establishes their right to speak and the legitimacy of what they are saying according to who they are. They start the story by giving their Cashinahua name to show that they are an authentic member of the tribe who has had the story passed down to them. It is therefore an exampie of self-legitimation: what they say should be accepted because of who they are. Narratives help to convey the rules on which social order is based; they play a key role in socialization.

Science and metanarratives

With the Enlightenment, narrative language-games were largely replaced by scientific 'denotative' games. The scientist sees narrative as 'belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, custom, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology'. In denotative language-games it is irrelevant who is speaking; statements are judged as to whether they are true or false. Scientific statements are scrutinized and are 'subject to argumentation or proof' by other participants in the game. Evidence and rational argument are employed to establish whether a statement should be accepted or rejected.

However, probing deeper, Lyotard argues that science is unable to rid itself entirely of narrative knowledge. Science tries to maintain distance between itself and social conventions so that it can remain objective. But this raises the question of the purpose of science. How can the vast expenditure on science be justified if it is kept separate from social life? In the end science rests upon 'metanarratives' – narratives that give meaning to other narratives. Metanarratives give a sense of purpose to scientific endeavour and a sense of direction to social life. They suggest that humans can progress, through science, towards defeating ignorance and oppression. Science can help humans to conquer nature and become more self-conscious.

These metanarratives have had a major influence on Western thought, from the French Revolution to twentieth-century Marxism. Knowledge is also justified as being good in itself, enabling human beings to fulfil their potential. (This is reflected in the liberal ideal of education examined on pp. 780–2.)

Postmodernism

According to Lyotard, metanarratives of human emancipation, self-fulfilment and social progress are undermined by the advent of postmodernism. An 'incredulity towards metanarratives' develops. People no longer believe that reason can conquer superstition, that humans can be perfected or that communism can produce a perfect society.

The postmodern era has two main characteristics. First, the search for truth is abandoned as denotative language-games fall into disrepute. Knowledge fragments into a multiplicity of different language-games that are specific to particular areas of science or social life. Diversity is the order of the day as people lose faith in the search for one great truth that unites and justifies all knowledge.

Second, denotative language-games are replaced by technical language-games. Here, statements are judged not by whether they are true, but by whether they are useful and efficient or not. Emphasis shifts from the ultimate ends of human activity, towards the technical means through which things can be achieved. In universities, for example, researchers ask what use something is rather than whether it is true. Research becomes geared to producing knowledge that is saleable.

Knowledge and computer technology

Lyotard does not devote much attention to explaining how these changes have come about. However, he seems to attribute most importance to technology. He says that postmodernism rests upon the 'miniaturization and commercialization' of machines. Computer technology has become the principal 'force of production'.

Most postmodern scientific developments are concerned with communication, language and information storage. Knowledge that cannot be translated into a form usable by computers tends to get lost or disregarded. Increasingly, economic activity centres around information technology. Social life is monitored and controlled more and more by computerized machines; and control over knowledge becomes the major source of power. Knowledge is no longer an end in itself, but something to be bought and sold, perhaps even fought over. Lyotard speculates that future wars will not be about territorial disputes, but about disputes over the control of knowledge.

To Lyotard, postmodern society is based on the production and exchange of knowledge that can be sold. Grand theories of truth, justice and progress have fallen out of fashion. Language-games concern whether things are efficient and saleable rather than whether they serve some ultimate human purpose or goal.

Lyotard's analysis sometimes sounds like a Marxist attack on capitalism. In fact, though, he praises the consequences of postmodernism. The search for truth in modern thinking led only to 'as much terror as we can take' (for example, repression under Stalin in the communist USSR). Postmodernism offers the possibility of tolerance and creative diversity, in which humans are not corrupted by some doctrinaire metanarrative.

Lyotard – a critique

Like most advocates of postmodernism, Lyotard indulges in a number of paradoxes. While attacking 'metanarratives', Lyotard himself makes the most sweeping generalizations about the direction of human development, as well as making moral judgements about its desirability. While dismissing the possibility of objective knowledge, he claims to have identified and accurately described the development of key features of human societies. The evidence he uses to support his claims is sparse, leaving the reader with little reason to prefer Lyotard's 'language-game' to that of other social theorists. While rejoicing in diversity, Lyotard ends up celebrating language-games conducted according to one set of rules – those of the technical language-game. Terry Eagleton, a Marxist critic of Lyotard, sees this as nothing more than a justification for capitalism and the pursuit of profit regardless of the human consequences (quoted in Connor, 1989).

Jean Baudrillard – *Simulations*

Baudrillard does not explicitly discuss the concept of postmodernism in his most influential book, Simulations (1983). Nevertheless he is widely seen as a postmodern theorist. Like Lyotard, he sees societies as having entered a new and distinctive phase, and he relates this change to language and knowledge. Unlike Lyotard, he is rather pessimistic about the consequences of this change, seeing it as a kind of trap from which escape is impossible.

Signs and the economy

Baudrillard argues, in contradiction of Marxists, that society has moved away from being based upon production and being shaped by the economic forces involved in exchanging material goods. The central importance of the buying and selling of material goods has now been replaced by the buying and selling of signs and images, which have little if any relationship to material reality. Baudrillard is not explicit about what he means in this context, but examples might include the ways in which cars, cigarettes, pop stars and political parties have become more associated with images than any substance that might lie behind them (engines, nicotine content, music and policies respectively). The images are everything, the reality nothing.

The development of signs

Baudrillard argues that signs in human culture have passed through four main stages:

1 In the first stage, signs (words, images, etc.) are a 'reflection of a basic reality'.

2 In the next stage, the sign 'masks and perverts some basic reality'. Images become a distortion of the truth but they have not lost all connection with things that really exist.
3 In the third stage, the sign 'masks the absence of some basic reality'. For example, icons may disguise the fact that God does not exist.
4 Finally, the sign 'bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum'.

A simulacrum is an image of something that does not exist and has never existed. To Baudrillard, modern society is based upon the production and exchange of free-floating images. Signifiers (words and images) have no connection with anything real that is signified (the things that words and images refer to).

Examples of simulacra

Baudrillard provides a number of examples to illustrate this rather sweeping claim. Disneyland is described as 'a perfect model' of a simulacrum. It is a copy of imaginary worlds such as 'Pirates, the Frontier, Future World'. Simulacra are not confined to theme parks. According to Baudrillard the whole of Los Angeles is a kind of make-believe world founded upon stories and images that have no grounding in reality: it is 'nothing more than an immense script and a perpetual motion picture'.

In contemporary society the predominance of signifiers tends to destroy any basic reality to which they might refer. He gives the examples of a Filipino tribe called the Tasaday, the mummy of Rameses II, and a family called the Louds who were the subject of a fly-on-the-wall television documentary in the USA.

The Tasaday Indians were discovered in a remote area of the Philippines and began to be studied by anthropologists. However, the government believed that the traditional culture of the Tasaday was being destroyed by this process, and decided to return them to the jungle and isolate them from contemporary civilization. Thus they were turned into a simulation of a primitive society. They were no longer in their original and natural state, but they had come to represent all primitive peoples to Western scientists.

Science and technology also destroyed the originality of the mummy of the Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses II. Once the mummy was removed from its original site and placed in a museum, it began to deteriorate and scientific techniques were used to try to preserve it. At the same time, though, they altered it and destroyed its authenticity.

The Louds family was similarly destroyed. Chosen as a 'typical' Californian family, 300 hours of film of their life were broadcast. During the process the cohesion of the family fell apart and they went their separate ways. Whether this was due to television or not, the reality of the family was inevitably changed by the fact that they had become the object of a public spectacle.

Attempts to capture reality unavoidably lead to its destruction, so that science and television culture capture nothing but images of things that never existed or have already been destroyed.

Power and politics

Baudrillard is consistently gloomy about the consequences of all this. If it has become impossible to grasp reality, it is also impossible to change it. Society has 'imploded' and become like a black hole in which nothing can escape the exchange of signs with no real meaning. For example, the meaning of a terrorist outrage becomes arbitrary. It can equally easily be interpreted as the work of left-wingers or right-wingers or political moderates who want to discredit extremists of both sides.

In Baudrillard's view, power is no longer unequally distributed, it has just disappeared. Nobody can exercise power to change things. He compares the situation to nuclear deterrence where the two sides cancel each other out and make action impossible. While President Kennedy was assassinated because he might have real power, Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Reagan were merely puppets without any genuine chance of changing America or the outside world. With the end of the real and its substitution by simulacra, and the end of effective power, we are all trapped in a kind of prison, deprived of our freedom to change things, and condemned to the interminable exchange of meaningless signs.

Television

Baudrillard, then, differs from Lyotard in that he sees humans as trapped into a type of powerless uniformity, and not liberated by plurality and diversity. If anything, Baudrillard is even more vague than Lyotard in explaining how the postmodern era came about. However, he does seem to attach special importance to the mass media and to television in particular. He talks about 'the dissolution of life into TV' and says, 'TV watches us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us.' It seems that it is television that is primarily responsible for ushering in a situation where image and reality can no longer be distinguished.

Baudrillard – a critique

Baudrillard's writing is highly abstract. It relies upon the use of examples to illustrate arguments and consequently offers no systematic evidence to justify its case. For example, Baudrillard makes no attempt to show that individuals are immersed in the world of

television, that Disneyland is seen as anything more than fantasy by its customers, or that the residents of Los Angeles have lost their grip on reality. His analysis of politics degenerates into totally unsubstantiated assertions. For example, he describes Reagan as a 'puppet' who, in common with other 'postmodern' politicians, has no power.

David Harvey accepts that Reagan's election might have owed a good deal to his television image, but argues that the reality of his policies and their very real effects on the lives of many Americans cannot be denied. He says:

> *A rising tide of social inequality engulfed the United States in the Reagan years, reaching a post-war high in 1986. ... Between 1979 and 1986, the number of poor families with children increased by 35 per cent. ... In spite of surging unemployment (cresting at over 10 per cent by official figures in 1982) the percentage of unemployed receiving any federal benefit fell to only 32 per cent, the lowest level in the history of social insurance.*
>
> Harvey, 1990

In addition, nearly 40 million were left with no medical insurance. Perhaps, then, it is Baudrillard who has lost his grasp on reality rather than the 'postmodern' world.

In his later work, Baudrillard (1995) goes as far as claiming that the Gulf War (in which the USA, Britain and other countries attacked Iraq as a response to its invasion of Kuwait) did not take place. From Baudrillard's point of view, the Gulf War was just a series of images produced by the media with no evidence that what they depicted was real. Such views display Baudrillard's lack of grip on reality, since there are innumerable eye-witnesses to the events, not to mention graves containing the corpses of those who died during the war.

(For further descriptions and evaluations of postmodernism in relation to particular topics see pp. 119–23, 157–63, 276–82, 423–7, 495–500, 577–84, 639–47, 765–71, 818–21, 916–21, 949–50 and 990–1.)

David Harvey – Marxism and post-modernity

David Harvey (1990) himself offers a very different view from that of either Lyotard or Baudrillard. Harvey is a theorist of postmodernity, not a postmodern theorist. He accepts that important changes have taken place in society but he does not regard them as absolutely fundamental, nor does he believe that modern approaches to sociological theory are outdated. Harvey rejects the claim that metanarratives have outlived their usefulness, since he uses Marxism as the basis of his analysis. He makes a greater effort to explain the changes in contemporary societies than most postmodernists, and he puts particular emphasis on economic factors in influencing change. Harvey can be described as a neo-Marxist who has developed a theory of postmodernity. His work is much more explicitly sociological than that of Lyotard and Baudrillard.

Continuities and changes in capitalism

Harvey argues that a capitalist economic system remains at the heart of contemporary Western societies. This economic system retains three basic characteristics that have not disappeared with postmodernity:

1. Capitalism is based upon economic growth and is defined as being in crisis when there is no growth.
2. Capitalism is based upon workers being paid less than the value of the commodities they produce, so that profits can be made. The 'dynamics of class struggle' are therefore inevitably involved in capitalist economies and societies.
3. Capitalism is dynamic. It is always producing new ways of organizing work and technological innovation, as businesses seek to get ahead of their competitors.

These basic characteristics mean that capitalism is always likely to change. As it develops, new ways of controlling labour and trying to ensure profitability become necessary. According to Harvey, and Marxist theory in general, periods of crisis are unavoidable. These crises lead to changes in the economy which may have important consequences for society and culture.

Harvey sees postmodernity as a response to one such crisis and dates its arrival at 1973. From the end of the Second World War until 1973, capitalism was fairly stable. There was steady growth in most countries, rising living standards and relative harmony between social classes. From 1973, a series of economic problems struck the world capitalist economy. Oil producers increased the price of oil, unemployment began to rise, profits fell and many countries experienced stagflation, that is, high inflation without economic growth. These problems led to, in Harvey's words, a different 'regime of accumulation', different ways of trying to ensure growth and profitability. This in turn helped to produce some of the cultural changes that have been termed postmodernity, and produced a new 'mode of social and political regulation'.

Harvey stresses that many aspects of postmodernity are not entirely new. Throughout its history, capitalism has always contained contradictory tendencies. He says, 'there is never one fixed configuration,

but a swaying back and forth between centralization and decentralization, between authority and deconstruction, between hierarchy and anarchy, between permanence and flexibility'. Nevertheless, he believes that capitalism has now swayed more towards the latter, postmodern, set of characteristics, and away from the former, modern, ones.

Economic change and postmodernity

The shift from modernity to postmodernity is characterized by a change to 'flexible accumulation'. Harvey is among those who claim that flexibility in business (often termed post-Fordism) has begun to replace Fordism (see pp. 713–17 for the debate on post-Fordism). He sees flexible accumulation as involving rapid changes in labour markets, products and patterns of consumption; more rapid technological change; increasing employment in the service sector; the reduction of trade union power; high unemployment; and reduced security for workers who are expected to be flexible enough to accommodate the ever-changing demands of their employers. Businesses can no longer rely upon regular and long-term profits and so have to constantly adapt to succeed. In terms of consumption, new products such as computer games and new services in the leisure industry have led to cultural changes. Capitalists have succeeded in encouraging rapid shifts in fashion (for example, in clothes and music) which allow profits to be continually renewed.

Cultural and social changes

These economic changes underlie the cultural, political and social changes that have been the focus of attention for some other writers. In particular, the penetration of capitalism into so many areas of leisure to encourage consumption has resulted in 'the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodern aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion and the commodification of cultural forms'. As mass production has become less profitable, flexible accumulation has led to capitalism exploiting smaller markets with more specialized tastes, thus encouraging cultural diversity.

Increasing geographical mobility and the development of large-scale tourism have led to an increased intermingling of the world's cultures. Faster and cheaper travel and the pervasiveness of mass communications, have, according to Harvey, affected the way people perceive space and time. Both have been compressed and he associates this with the speeding up of production and the use of techniques such as 'just in time' (see p. 714).

A sense of time and place has been weakened in postmodernity. For example, in major cities you can eat food from around the world – French croissants, Japanese sushi, American doughnuts, Chinese crispy fried duck – listen to world music from every continent, and buy 'Kenyan haricot beans, Californian celery and avocados, North African potatoes, Canadian apples and Chilean grapes' in supermarkets. Furthermore, 'the world's geographical complexity is nightly reduced to a series of images on a static television screen'.

Time gets confused as people can visit the 'Old World' at Disneyland, or dress up to attend a medieval banquet in a castle. Times, places and cultures get mixed together in close proximity. This becomes reflected in art, philosophy and social thought and is typified by 'ephemerality, collage, fragmentation'. Firm foundations for knowledge or beliefs seem undermined by this diversity and confusion, but, to Harvey, such foundations need not and should not be lost.

Time and space have also been compressed in the world financial system. Trading in stocks, shares, currencies and commodities continues 24 hours a day and, with computer technology, takes place almost instantaneously. What happens in Tokyo affects the markets in London, New York and elsewhere. All countries of the world are affected by the enormous debts owed by the Third World to the First. According to Harvey the world financial system has become so complex that it is almost impossible for national governments to understand, never mind control. (The relative powerlessness of national governments can be illustrated by the stock market crash in October 1987, and the turmoil in the money markets in 1992 which forced the British government to take the pound out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism.)

These developments, combined with a shift to flexible accumulation, encouraged political changes. They can be related to the increasing importance of image in politics. Despite the problems experienced by America under President Reagan, he was able to get re-elected as a 'tough but warm, avuncular and well-meaning person who had an abiding faith in the greatness and goodness of America'. Both Reagan and Thatcher caught the economic mood of the times by encouraging entrepreneurship, necessary in a period of flexible accumulation. Both stressed the limitations of government power and the need to trust the markets, though both were forced to intervene in the economy to deal with problems such as Third World debt. Both weakened trade union power, making it easier for capitalists to make a profit under the new conditions.

According to David Harvey, postmodernity has not just affected governments, it has also influenced the development of political and social movements. Class issues and workers' movements have become less important as sources of opposition to capitalism. Political opposition has become more fragmented into diverse movements representing particular groups or issues. There are 'religious, mystical,

social, communitarian, humanitarian' movements, which 'define themselves directly in terms of an antagonism to the power of money and of rationalized conceptions of space and time over daily life'. Issues relating to Women's Liberation, ethnic inequalities and poverty in the Third World have become increasingly important.

But Harvey also detects some evidence that these diverse social movements may be starting to come together. Some political leaders, such as Jesse Jackson in the USA, have urged the development of a 'Rainbow Coalition' of oppressed minorities. Harvey claims to have found signs of 'a new internationalism in the ecological sphere ... and in the fight against racism, apartheid, world hunger, uneven geographical development'. He cites Live Aid as one example, though admitting that it confined itself largely to image-making rather than political organization. Nevertheless he sees a possibility of launching a 'counter-attack' against some of the worst consequences of postmodernity.

Harvey is willing to acknowledge that very significant changes have taken place in contemporary societies. However, he rejects the belief of many postmodern theorists that the Enlightenment project should be abandoned. Modern societies can be systematically studied and understood, and ways of improving them and the lives of those who live in them can be found. Society is real and consists of more than language-games or simulacra.

Modern theories of society and the sociology of modernity

As well as David Harvey, there are numerous sociologists who believe that the basic principles of modern sociological theories remain valid. They believe that it is possible to analyse the social world rationally, to develop coherent theories of that social world, and to intervene to improve it. Such sociologists reject the claims of postmodernists that metanarratives are dangerous, that all knowledge is relative and that the Enlightenment project of improving society has reached the end of the road.

A good example of such a view is provided by the work of Kenan Malik (see pp. 281–2). Malik claims that racism is not a product of modernity, but a consequence of the social relations of capitalism. He believes that Enlightenment thinking provides a foundation for the belief that humans should be treated equally. He points out that the postmodernist's emphasis on plurality and diversity can be used as an excuse to support and justify inequality.

Throughout this book there are numerous examples of sociologists who continue to use a modern approach in analysing society, and who also continue to insist that it is possible to improve society. A few examples are: Gordon Marshall and his colleagues' work on class inequality (see pp. 88–9), Peter Townsend's work on poverty (see pp. 296–300), Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy (see pp. 150–6), and Jock Young's new left realist theories of crime (see pp. 391–9). Whatever the merits of the work of such sociologists, the types of approach used by them suggest that modern sociological theory and research are far from exhausted.

Anthony Giddens – high modernity and beyond

Anthony Giddens is undoubtedly one of the most influential sociologists who reject both the claims of postmodernism and the theory of postmodernity. Like the sociologists mentioned above, Giddens (1990) does not accept that all Enlightenment thinking must be abandoned, that metanarratives no longer have a place or that all knowledge is relative. Furthermore, unlike sociologists such as David Harvey, he also rejects the idea that Western societies have entered an era of postmodernity. Nevertheless, Giddens does believe that significant changes have taken place within modernity and he believes that postmodernity *might* develop in the future.

The central features of modernity

Giddens starts his analysis by contrasting modern and traditional societies. He argues that, compared to traditional societies, modern societies are characterized by a more rapid pace of change. Furthermore, the scope of the changes is much greater than in traditional society. Changes rapidly encompass virtually the whole of the globe and are not confined to geographically limited areas.

Giddens argues that a number of key features of modernity lead to the rapid pace and widespread scope of change:

1 There is a process of 'time–space distanciation'. This process involves the separation of time from space. In modernity, what time it is does not depend upon where you are. In pre-industrial societies time was not standardized across the

globe, and what time it was therefore depended on where you were. By the twentieth century all parts of the world used a standardized system of recording time. This allowed the development of railway, and later airline, timetables, which made it possible to coordinate the movement of goods and people across space, over time.

2 Time–space distanciation was important as a crucial disembedding mechanism. Giddens describes disembedding as 'the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction' (Giddens, 1990). Disembedding allows people to relate to and interact with others who do not live in the local area. It reduces the importance of local contacts and starts to break down geographical constraints. Thus time–space distanciation was a disembedding mechanism partly because it made travel easier.

3 Another important disembedding mechanism was the development of symbolic tokens. By far the most important type of symbolic token is money. Money allows the interchange of goods and services between people who have never met each other. It allows these exchanges to take place over long distances without face-to-face bartering. The existence of credit allows the deferment of payments, reducing the obstacles that time limits previously imposed on conducting exchanges.

4 Another important disembedding mechanism is the development of expert systems. Giddens defines these as 'systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environment in which we live today'. Examples of expert systems include engineering and medicine. Expert systems allow people living in modernity to carry out their day-to-day activities and to accomplish things without any knowledge of the technicalities of what they are doing. For example, motorists can drive around without any knowledge of how to build roads; patients can undergo heart surgery without knowing how it is carried out; and airline passengers can cross continents without having any knowledge of aeronautical engineering. Like other disembedding mechanisms, expert systems allow many aspects of social life to proceed without the need for personal relationships between those involved.

5 As a result of the changes discussed above, modernity results in the basis of trust changing. In pre-industrial societies you trusted somebody because you knew them, and/or because their local reputation suggested that they were trustworthy. With modernity you place your trust in the expert systems that train people and monitor and regulate their behaviour. For example, you do not have to know an airline pilot and the airline's mechanics personally before you will board a plane. You trust that the training of the pilot and the mechanics, the technology used in the plane and the procedures for servicing and flying the aircraft are sufficiently reliable for you to undertake the journey.

6 Along with disembedding mechanisms, a crucial feature of modernity is the development of greater reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the 'reflexive monitoring of action': that is, the way in which humans think about and reflect upon what they are doing in order to consider acting differently in the future.

Humans have always been reflexive up to a point, but in pre-industrial societies the importance of tradition limited reflexivity. Humans would do some things simply because they were the traditional things to do. With modernity, tradition loses much of its importance and reflexivity becomes the norm. Giddens says, 'The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character.' This produces constant change and a permanent state of uncertainty.

Giddens does not agree with postmodernists such as Lyotard that modernity produces metanarratives that are accepted as the absolute truth. Instead, according to Giddens, modernity undermines all certainty. All knowledge is constantly reviewed and is always likely to be revised. This is most obvious in the social sciences where there is constant theoretical dispute and frequent development of new theories. Indeed, Giddens believes that sociology has a central place in the reflexivity of modernity. He describes sociology as 'the most generalised type of reflection upon modern social life' (Giddens, 1991).

The existence of sociological knowledge reflects back upon society and helps to shape the very social life it describes. According to Giddens, sociological thinking becomes embedded in society, it shapes the way people see the world, and influences their decisions. For example, people considering whether to marry are almost certain to be aware of sociological knowledge about the existence of high divorce rates and arguments about the instability of the family as an institution. Whether they decide to marry or not, awareness of such issues is bound to have some effect on their thinking. If they do get married, this awareness is likely to have some influence on the way they conduct their marriage. This in turn may affect future divorce rates. Giddens therefore believes that '*Modernity is itself deeply and intrinsically sociological*' (Giddens, 1990).

7 To Giddens, modernity is globalizing. Disembedding and reflexivity allow social interaction to stretch across the globe, with the result that social life in particular localities is increasingly shaped by events taking place far away (see Chapter 9, pp. 630–1, for more details of Giddens's views on globalization).

The institutions of modernity

According to Giddens, modernity is based upon four key institutions. These are:

1 Capitalism. Giddens defines capitalism as 'capital accumulation in the context of competitive labour

and productive markets' (Giddens, 1990). He sees capitalism as 'intrinsically unstable and restless'. Capitalists are always seeking new markets and trying to develop new products in the pursuit of profit. This makes modernity rather unsettling for the individual and contributes to the process of globalization.

2 Industrialism. This involves 'the use of inanimate sources of material power in the production of goods, coupled to the central role of machinery in the production process' (Giddens, 1990). Industrialism produces a massive increase in the productivity of human labour.

3 Surveillance. This refers to 'the supervision of subject populations in the political sphere' (Giddens, 1991). In modernity the state devises a range of administrative systems to monitor the behaviour of populations so that people can be controlled (see the work of Foucault, discussed on pp. 635–9).

4 Military power. This concerns 'the control of the means of violence in the context of the industrialisation of war' (Giddens, 1990). From the First World War onwards, military technology allowed ever-greater destructive power to be used in warfare.

(For an illustration representing these views, see Figure 9.2, p. 646.)

Living in modernity

Modernity does not just consist of a number of institutions; it is also a lived experience for individuals. Giddens considers two sociological theories of the experience of modernity:

1 For Weber, modernity was largely experienced in terms of the '"steel-hard" cage of bureaucratic rationality' (Giddens, 1990). People were trapped in the logic of bureaucratic rationality, and had little freedom to express themselves.

Giddens rejects this view. He argues that 'Rather than tending inevitably towards rigidity, organisations produce arenas of autonomy and spontaneity – which are often less easy to achieve in smaller groups.'

2 For Marx, modernity was experienced as 'a monster'. It was characterized by the exploitation of the mass of the population who were alienated from their true humanity by the nature of capitalist work (see pp. 687–9). However, Marx did believe that the monster could be tamed with the advent of a communist society.

Giddens also rejects this view. He does not see modernity in such a negative light. As well as having some negative effects, it does open up new possibilities in people's lives which were not available in pre-modern societies.

Giddens develops an alternative image of modernity. He sees it as similar to a 'juggernaut – a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control and which could rend itself asunder'.

It threatens to rush out of control because there are certain high consequence risks that characterize the most recent phase of modernity and that threaten to destroy human society. These risks are:

1 The 'growth of totalitarian power': this comes from the existence of systems of surveillance which make the close control of populations feasible.

2 The 'collapse of economic growth mechanisms': this stems from the unpredictability of capitalism with its booms and slumps, and the finite nature of certain resources (such as oil) on which capitalism currently depends.

3 'Nuclear conflict of large-scale warfare' remains a real possibility while a number of nations possess the means of mass destruction. Nobody can be sure that the principle of deterrence amongst major military powers will continue to work indefinitely.

4 'Ecological decay or disaster' is also a real possibility, with nuclear accidents (like that at Chernobyl), global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer, and other, as yet unforeseen, possibilities threatening human life on earth.

To Giddens, high modernity could end with disaster of one sort or another. The juggernaut might career out of control and come to an abrupt end in a crash. However, he sees this as only one possibility. Attempts to steer the juggernaut of high modernity *may* be successful and are still worthwhile.

Steering the juggernaut

Giddens rejects the view of postmodernists that planned intervention in society is neither desirable nor effective. He admits that there are problems with the Enlightenment view that modernity can be rationally planned, and that society can be perfected through such planning. Giddens argues that there is always an element of uncertainty and unpredictability in planning society. This stems from the reflexivity of social life, as discussed earlier. Sociological knowledge and theories can result in changes in the societies that they are trying to describe and analyse.

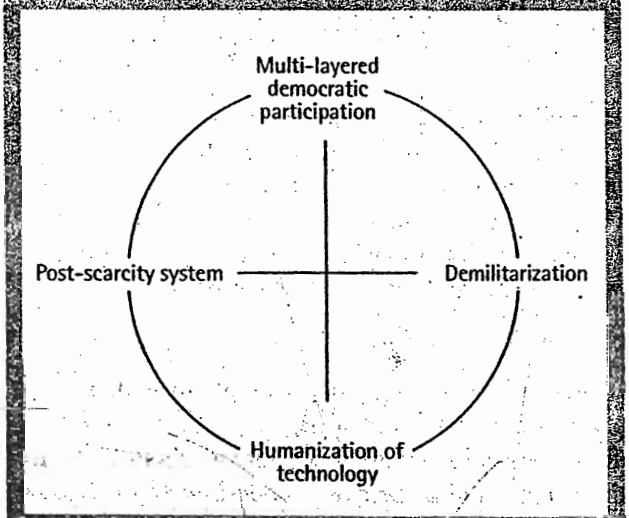
The nature of society can never be entirely pinned down, since the attempt to understand it can at the same time change it. Furthermore, societies are highly complex. Attempts to intervene to change society can have unintended consequences and end up doing more harm than good. However, none of this means that it is impossible to try to steer the juggernaut of modernity at least roughly in the direction in which you want to go. Knowledge about

society may be imperfect, but it is not useless. The effects of intervention in society may be somewhat unpredictable, but lack of intervention is even more likely to end in calamity. With care, there is a good chance that the high consequence risks that threaten modernity will be avoided, and that human society will progress further.

Modernity and 'post-modernity'

Unlike theorists of postmodernity, Giddens believes that we still live in an era of modernity or high modernity. However, he does not entirely reject the idea of 'post-modernity' (unlike most theorists, Giddens hyphenates this term). Instead of seeing postmodernity as something that has already been attained, he uses the term to describe a type of society that may come into existence in the future. According to Giddens, a 'post-modern' society will move beyond each of the four dominant institutional structures of modernity. The main institutions of a 'post-modern' social order are shown in Figure 15.1.

Figure 15.1 The contours of a 'post-modern' order



Source: A. Giddens (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 164

The four transformations that would take place in the shift from modernity to 'post-modernity' are as follows:

1 Capitalism would be transformed into a post-scarcity system. Markets would continue to exist, but they would not produce the inequality typical of modernity because there would be an ample supply of goods for everybody. This would be achieved partly through economic growth, but also through people in the richer countries scaling down their aspirations. People will accept a lower standard of living because of 'development fatigue'. According to Giddens there is evidence that people in richer countries are becoming tired of the negative consequences of unlimited economic growth. They are unhappy with overcrowded roads, pollution and soaring house prices. People are coming to understand that there are ecological limits to how much economic growth the environment can stand. They are therefore becoming willing to accept that lower incomes might actually improve the *quality* of people's lives. Richer nations would have to accept the need to share some wealth with poorer nations if a post-scarcity system were to be achieved.
2 Societies based on surveillance would be replaced by societies in which there was multi-layered democratic participation. The development of techniques of surveillance helps to convince governments that the cooperation and support of populations are essential for the effective exercise of power. People increasingly demand the right to have a say in all aspects of their lives, at local, national and even global level. There are 'pressures towards democratic participation in the workplace, in local associations, in media organisations, and in transnational groupings of various sorts'.
3 In a postmodern society the dominance of military power would give way to demilitarization. Globalization and the accompanying increase in interdependence between nations are likely to mean that going to war makes little sense. Long-established borders between nations are increasingly accepted, and disputes over territory are likely to become infrequent. Furthermore, states will be keen to reduce the enormous costs of building up armed forces or fighting wars.
4 Finally, industrialism would be superseded by the humanization of technology. With the development of areas such as genetics and biotechnology, people are becoming increasingly aware of the need to exercise control over technology to prevent it having disastrous consequences. They are likely to become concerned over issues such as human cloning, transplanting animal organs into humans, and genetically modified crops. Such concerns would lead, in a 'post-modern' society, to strict limits being placed on the development and use of technology to prevent it causing environmental disaster or human tragedy.

(For more details of Giddens's theories see pp. 646–7 and 496–8.)

Conclusions

Giddens's vision of a 'post-modern' society is (as he admits) a rather idealistic one. It is hard, for example, to envisage richer countries readily sharing their wealth with poorer ones, or people in the richer countries accepting that their living standards will not grow in the future.

Giddens's general theory is rather abstract. It is backed up with occasional examples rather than the use of systematic evidence. However, it does provide

an alternative perspective to those of postmodernism and theories of postmodernity. It suggests that claims that we have entered postmodernity may, at best, be premature. More importantly, it suggests that sociological analysis remains possible and desirable. If the arguments of postmodernism were accepted, then all attempts to understand social structures and to shape the future development of society as a whole would be abandoned. Using Giddens's analogy, this would involve taking your hands off the steering wheel of the juggernaut, and trusting to fate that it will not crash.

Sociological knowledge may be imperfect, and attempts to shape society may not always succeed, but most sociologists still believe that these endeavours are worthwhile. More than that, it can be argued that the sociological imagination is more important than ever if we are to control the risks found in contemporary societies, and fulfil the potential for improving people's lives.

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$$\frac{2x+y}{x+y} = 3$$

$$\frac{2}{\frac{x}{x}} + \frac{1}{\frac{y}{y}} = 3$$

$$3 = 3$$