

## Theory and methods

This chapter examines a number of ideas related to sociological *methodology*; how, in short, we can produce *reliable* and *valid* knowledge about the social world, both in theoretical terms, such as different sociological theories, and in practical terms when, for example, we explore the relationship between sociological theory and *social policy*.

This chapter, therefore, is designed to enhance and complement the work you did on sociological *methods* at AS level.

### 1. Concepts of modernity and postmodernity in relation to sociological theory – consensus, conflict, structural and social action theories



#### Preparing the ground: Sociology and modernity

‘Sociology’, according to **Peter Taylor** (2000), ‘is a product of modernity’ – by which he means it has its origins, as an academic discipline, in the development of ‘modern society’. To understand why this is significant, we can initially classify our society in terms of three broad historical periods:

- **Pre-modern**, considered (very roughly) as a type of society existing before the late sixteenth century.
- **Modern**, a type that developed out of the pre-modern period and (arguably) stretches to the late twentieth century.

- **Postmodern** – a type considered by some sociologists (others, such as **Giddens** (1998) or **Habermas** (1992) refer to this period as ‘high’ or ‘late’ modernity) to be characteristic of our society in the twenty-first century.

This, as we stress, is a very *basic classification* used primarily to sensitise you to the concept of different types of society. Its secondary purpose is to allow us to identify some *key features* (economic, political and cultural) of modern society that arguably differentiate it from both its pre- and postmodern counterparts.

#### WARM-UP: SOCIETIES AS SHOPS

In this exercise we can use an analogy to understand the difference between types of society. Think of:

- pre-modern society as a corner shop
- modern society as a supermarket
- postmodern society as shopping on the internet.

In small groups, identify some of the features that characterise the different types of shops (a mall, for example, is much larger than a corner shop, it has more choice and involves different types of relationship between customer and staff).

As a class, discuss how these differences can be applied to different types of society.

## Economic characteristics

Modernity differs from *pre-modernity* in a number of ways:

**Technology:** The invention of machines – and the gradual discovery/invention of new sources of power (gas, electricity and, eventually, nuclear, for example) – opened up the potential for:

- **Industrialisation** – the application of machine technology to the production of things (*commodities*). People working with machines (*mechanisation*) led to the development of factories that allowed large quantities of goods to be produced quickly, cheaply and to the same general standard (*mass production*). Further developments included *automation* (machines controlling other machines, with little or no direct human involvement) and, most recently, the *computerisation* of some production processes.

Alongside these developments, modern society is characterised by:

**Capitalist** economic relationships ('employer–employee', for example) that involve a process of:

**Rationalisation**, in the sense of ideas about organisation and efficiency being applied to the production process. As **Sarup**

(1993) puts it, modernity involves '... the progressive economic and administrative rationalisation ... of the social world'. For **Weber** (1905), rationalisation involved *institutions* (such as work) and *practices* becoming increasingly well organised and efficient. Examples of different types of economic rationalisation include:

- **Fordism:** Named after the production-line technique developed by the US car manufacturer Henry Ford at the beginning of the twentieth century. With this technique a complex task, such as assembling a car, is broken down into a number of smaller, relatively simple tasks.



## The potting shed

Modern supermarkets are contemporary examples of rationally organised institutions. Identify and briefly explain two ways 'selling food' is broken down into highly specialised roles.

- **Global Fordism:** Where *Fordism* involves production-line principles applied *within* a factory, this version involves different parts of a product being created in different countries (where labour and parts may be relatively inexpensive) and assembled in yet another country.
- **Just-in-time (JIT):** Involves bringing together the parts needed to create a product 'just in time' to sell the completed product (thereby saving on things like storage costs).

For **Weber**, a further feature that developed alongside *rationalisation* was:

**Bureaucracy**, which **Ritzer** (1996) describes as 'a large-scale organisation

composed of a hierarchy of offices ... people have certain responsibilities and must act in accord with rules, written regulations, and ... compulsion exercised by those who occupy higher-level positions’.

A final characteristic we can add (with the proviso that there is some dispute as to whether this is characteristic of *modernity* or *postmodernity*) is:

**Globalisation**, considered in terms of ideas such as:

- **Global Fordism.**
- **Transnational corporations** that operate and trade on a global scale. Areas such as *telecommunications* (BT, for example) and *computer software* (think Microsoft – which sounds a bit like subliminal advertising) are contemporary examples of global marketplaces for transnational companies.

## Political characteristics

Modernity involves ideas like:

- **Nation states:** Although ‘a nation’ may exist in some pre-modern societies, a *nation state* is a feature of modernity – the basic idea being that *states* develop systems of national government with some form of political representation (a parliament, for example), legal system, civil service and fixed geographic borders.
- **Representation:** This doesn’t have to be *democratic* – many early-modern nation states involved monarchies, and even into the twentieth century a range of totalitarian societies have existed (Germany, Italy, Spain and the USSR, for example), but political democracy is a feature of most Western societies in the twenty-first century.

## \* SYNOPTIC LINK

**Power and politics:** Note how the above ideas about the origin and nature of the state underpin discussion of the role of the state in modern society.

If we turn the focus slightly to the idea of *modernity* itself (as a way of thinking about and understanding the social and natural worlds), we can explore the:

**Cultural** characteristics of modern society, mainly because modernity involved major changes in the way people experience and interpret the world (something that led to the development of both sociology and many other forms of intellectual endeavour).

## Cultural characteristics

The obvious place to start, in this respect, is with the concept of:

**Belief systems** which, for our current purpose, we can examine in terms of:

**The Enlightenment:** Harvey (1990) argues that the origins of *modernity* as a belief are in the explosion of creative thinking and practice that began in late seventeenth-century Europe. As Scambler and Higgs (1998) argue: ‘Modernity refers to Western society over the past 200 years, with its triumphs of medicine and science, beliefs in social progress and improvement, and the emergence of mass institutions such as hospitals, schools, and the nation state, as well as mass production. Social theory ... has its roots in the project of modernity.’

The philosopher and social reformer Thomas Paine (1795) called the Enlightenment the ‘Age of Reason’, with good reason (pun intended) because it involved rejecting the ‘ignorance and superstition’ of pre-modernity and embracing

a rational understanding of the natural and social worlds – an idea that introduces a major defining feature of modernity:

**Science:** For O'Donnell (1997)

modernity is: '... a period during which science and reason become the main means by which human beings seek to understand the world and solve problems ... modernity is driven by a belief in the power of human reason to understand and change, in short, to master the world'; and the impact of scientific thought was – and continues to be – felt in terms of:

**Objectivity:** Scientific beliefs involve the idea that it's possible to both discover and create knowledge through objective observations. In other words, both the natural world (the object of study) and the scientific method are based on:

**Foundational principles** or assumptions.

In the former, the world is subject to 'laws' governing behaviour and in the latter, objective science can be used to discover these laws (based, for example, on the foundational principle of 'cause and effect').

Science, therefore, is a very powerful method of explaining the world, for two reasons:

- **Truth** can be separated from fallacy (*fiction*). A classic example is the religious suppression of Galileo's argument that the Earth revolved around the Sun (and not the other way around, as the Catholic Church hierarchy believed). For a time this idea was successfully suppressed, but its *demonstrable truth* was simply too powerful to deny. Under modernity, therefore, *objective truths* replace *subjective faiths* as the primary form of explanation.
- **Instrumental utility:** Keat and Urry (1975) note that one of the most powerful features of science is that 'it works' – scientific thinking and principles have a use in the 'real world' of cars, computers and compact disks.

From this, it's only a short step to the concept of:

**Progress** – the idea that, as we understand more and more about the natural world, modern society is constantly 'moving

## Discussion point: Can things only get better?

Split into two groups. One group should identify the *benefits* of science and the other should identify its *drawbacks*.

As a class, discuss the benefits/drawbacks you've identified (some, you'll find, have *both*).

Benefits	Drawbacks
Longer life expectancy The eradication of disease (such as smallpox)	Nuclear war? Genetic modifications
<b>Further examples?</b>	

forward' – from superstition to science, ignorance to knowledge and, finally, from subservience to mastery of nature.

Once the natural world has been 'mastered' (or at least its foundational principles understood), it's but a small step to the idea of mastery of the social world; if the inanimate world of 'things' is governed by natural laws, perhaps the same is true of the animated world of people?



### Digging deeper: Modernity and sociological theory

Given sociology's origins in 'the modern period', it's not surprising that the founders of the discipline (writers such as **Saint-Simon**, **Comte** and **Durkheim** in France, **Weber** and **Marx** in Germany and **Spencer** in England) were immersed in the general philosophies and principles of modernist social thought. **Lechner** (1998) notes: 'Modernity is the central concern of sociology as a discipline ... In its early period, sociology aimed to illuminate ... the changes that were remaking Europe and America ... it dealt with the consequences of industrialization and urbanization in leading nation-states ... [as] part of a broader debate about the meaning of social change.'

Sociology in the early modern period (from **Saint-Simon** onwards) was concerned with the description and explanation of modernity and its associated processes. To paraphrase **O'Donnell** (1997), sociology was initially driven by a belief in the power of human reason to understand, change and – possibly – master the social world. In this section, therefore, we're going to explore a couple of areas:

- **Themes:** involves relating some of the basic concepts of 'modernist sociology' to the cultural themes of modernity we outlined above.
- **Perspectives:** we can examine *consensus*, *conflict* and *social action* theories and their relationship to both *modernity* and *postmodernity*.

## Themes

In terms of the first of these ideas, therefore, in many of the classic texts of 'modernist sociology' we can see the basic themes of eighteenth/nineteenth-century thought:

**Science** represents one of the key ideas for classical sociology, since sociology, as the 'science of society', was founded on a number of assumptions that dovetailed neatly with modernity:

**Structure over action:** Just as behaviour in the natural world was subject to certain *objective forces* (laws of gravity, for example), social behaviour was subject to 'social forces' that pushed people into *action*. Different sociologists did, of course, have different views about the nature and extent of these forces:

- **Consensus** theorists (such as **Comte** and **Durkheim**) focused on forces of *order* and *stability* – in the case of the former, the attempt to isolate the laws governing social behaviour; in the latter case, laws governing *social statics* (order) and *dynamics* (change).
- **Conflict** theorists (such as **Marx**) focused on forces of *conflict* and *change* (such as the idea of class struggle).

Whatever their difference of emphasis and approach, the underlying belief was similar: these forces could be discovered using



### The X-Files

A modernist preoccupation with 'truth' and 'certainty' in a mixed-up postmodern world? Or just a daft TV programme about aliens?

scientific methods (such as detailed *observation*, *theory* development and *objective testing*) – a belief that reflected an underlying modernist certainty that 'the truth', to coin a phrase, was 'Out There Somewhere'. The task of *any* scientist was to find it.

Thus, if behaviour was subject to 'underlying forces', this presupposed:

**Regularity:** There was a *logic* to behaviour based on the various ways cultural behaviour was structured by 'unseen forces' that could be both *theorised* and *observed*:

**Theorised:** If behaviour isn't random, unstructured and meaningless, it follows that we can speculate about its causes.

**Observed** in terms of its effects (using various indicators). In dealing with objective forces, observation had to be similarly objective, structured and free from subjective judgements, in other words:

**Empirical:** *Objectivity* and *value freedom* are, for modernist theory, non-negotiable; if the aim is to find undiscovered or obscured truth, scientists must be objective in their theory and practice since, if they were not,

we could not be certain a truth had really been discovered.

## \* SYNOPTIC LINK

**Religion:** 'Secularisation' (a decline in religious belief and behaviour) is, for some sociologists, a 'hidden process' that cannot be directly observed; its existence, however, can be theorised by studying observable indicators of its effect.

**Essentialism:** All varieties of early modern sociology contained a belief in human behaviour/societies having fundamental (*essential*) organisational features, an idea reflected in the concept of:

**Progress:** For both consensus and conflict sociology the idea of a progressive revelation of 'scientific truths' was a fundamental goal. In this respect, the concept of *progress* is found in much of classical sociology – from writers as diverse as **Saint-Simon** (*Fonseca* and *Ussher* (1999) point to his call, in the early eighteenth century, for a 'science of society' having parity with the natural sciences), **Comte** (and his vision of society governed by a 'scientific priesthood' based on their understanding and mastery of the 'laws of human behaviour'), **Marx** (with his scientific critique of nineteenth-century capitalism and the vision of a future, communist society) and **Weber** (who saw the rational ordering of society as an achievable goal).

Finally, we can note how classical sociology gave rise to two forms of scientific *methodology*:

- **positivism**, mainly associated with *consensus* sociology, and
- **realism**, mainly associated with *conflict* sociology.

## Perspectives

**Modernist** sociology, as we've suggested, has historically been dominated by *structuralist perspectives*, the basic themes of which we can review next, beginning with:

**Consensus structuralism**, which involves, for **Giddens** (2001), a focus on the way agreement over '... basic social values by the members of a group, community or society' is both socially constructed and a fundamental characteristic of social behaviour. The persistence of society, therefore, is based around a:

**Common value system** involving 'consensual beliefs held by the majority of the population'. Value systems are organised around:

**Social institutions** – patterns of shared, stable behaviour that persist over time and around which modern societies are structured in terms of:

- **economic** institutions (work, for example)
- **political** institutions (government, police, judiciary, and so forth)
- **cultural** institutions (such as religion, education and the media).

Each institution (or set of related institutions) is *functional* for society because they are connected by their:

- **Purpose** – what each institution exists to do (the function of economic institutions is to provide the physical means to survive; the function of the family is primary socialisation, and so forth).
- **Needs** – what each institution takes from other institutions in order to function. Work, for example, needs the family to produce socialised individuals and, in return, provides the means of family group survival.

## Themes

This perspective is related to a couple of the main themes of modernism:

**Foundationalism:** The concept of *function* – the basic *foundation* on which consensus theory rests – takes a number of forms, an example of which is:

- **Functional imperative** (a command that must be obeyed): Each social institution is functionally connected to other, related institutions on the basis of the functions they must perform if a society is to survive and prosper (*purpose* and *needs*, in other words).
- **Structure:** Because institutions are *functionally linked*, we experience society in terms of pressures and constraints on our behaviour (the pressure to work, form a family, and so forth). In this respect, society is a *hidden hand* pushing people to perform the roles required for the reproduction of social order. **Durkheim** (1895) identified two significant aspects of order:
  - **Social solidarity** – the feeling we both belong to a society and have certain basic things in common: culture, socialisation, values and the like.
  - **Collective conscience** – the 'external expression' of the will of the people. This is the force that binds people to each other as a society (to integrate them into collective forms of behaviour).
- **Essentialism:** **Parsons** (1951) argued that every institution needs to solve four *essential problems* if it is to exist and function:
  - **Goal attainment** involves the need to



## Growing it yourself: Fun with GAIL

Although functional imperatives apply to any institution, Parsons (1959) explicitly identified the functional imperatives for an *education system*. Using the following table as a template (we've given you some examples to get you started), how do schools perform the following essential functions?

Goal attainment	Adaptation	Integration	Latency
Qualifications	The school	Uniforms	School rules
Further examples?			

set behavioural goals and to specify the means through which they can be achieved.

- **Adaptation** involves *creating* the means to achieve valued goals. This may, for example, involve the ability to provide the *physical necessities* of institutional life.
- **Integration**: People need to feel a part of any institution and one way to achieve this is to provide something they have in common (norms and values, for example). The ability of an institution to successfully integrate people is crucial for its internal harmony and reproduction.
- **Latency** (or pattern maintenance) refers to the development of *social control* mechanisms to manage tensions, motivate people, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and so forth.

### Perspectives

**Conflict structuralism** focuses, according to **Bilton et al. (1996)** on 'the notion that society is based on an unequal distribution of advantage and is characterised by a conflict of interests between the advantaged and the

disadvantaged'. It encompasses perspectives such as *Marxism* (conflict between social classes) and *feminism* (gender conflicts) and can be related to the main themes of modernism in terms of:

**Foundationalism**: Conflicts of interest, as we've just noted, are central to this perspective. For Marxists, a key term is:

**Social class**, where class conflict creates social change through the opposition of classes as they pursue their different *collective* interests. For Marxists, classes are defined in terms of their relationship to the:

**Means of production** – the social process whereby goods are created. For *traditional* Marxism, capitalist society consists of two great classes:

- **the bourgeoisie** – those who own and control the means of production
- **the proletariat** – those who sell their labour in the economic marketplace.

Modern forms of Marxism, however, tend to note the existence of:

**Class fractions** (subdivisions of each main class). For example, the bourgeoisie (or ruling class) might be subdivided into the:

- **bourgeoisie** (owners of large companies)