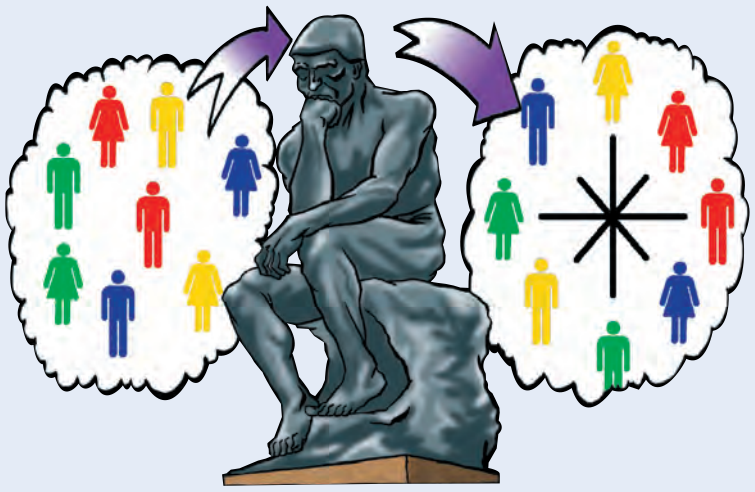
4 Sociological theory

Introduction

Throughout your sociology course, you have been examining specific topics with the help of sociological theories. You may have considered, for example, functionalist theories of education and the family, or Marxist theories of power and religion. Whilst these theories certainly do have a lot to say about such specific issues, they are in fact much more general theories about the nature of society, individuals, and the relationship between the two. The aim of this chapter is to explore these general theories in more depth, and to evaluate their contribution to our understanding of the nature and development of human societies and the individuals who comprise them.



chaptersummary

- **Unit 1** outlines the nature of sociological theory and the ways in which sociological theories can be evaluated.
- **Unit 2** discusses the origins of sociological theory and the work of three major 19th century theorists.
- **Unit 3** examines the establishment of three major schools of sociological theory which emerged during the first half of the 20th century.
- **Unit 4** looks at the ideas of structure and action in sociological theory.
- **Unit 5** examines two recent challenges to sociological theory.

Unit 1 What is sociological theory?

keyissues

1. What is sociological theory?
2. How can sociological theories be evaluated?

The topics you have looked at so far have been viewed from a number of different perspectives – for example, Marxism, functionalism and symbolic interactionism. These, together with several others, are sociological theories, and they are fundamental to the whole discipline of sociology. Before we go on to examine what the various sociological theories say, it will be helpful to explain what a sociological theory actually is. There are essentially two elements to this – sociological theories as *models* and sociological theories as *propositions*.

1.1 Sociological theories as models

If we try to create a model of something, we attempt to create a *representation* of it. The sorts of models with which most of us are familiar are models of objects such as boats or aircraft. When we make models of such objects, we attempt to represent their main features in such a way that they are recognisable, without actually building another whole boat or aircraft. Inevitably, when we build such a model, we emphasise some features of the real object at the expense of the others – one model of the Q.E.II might have a particularly realistic passenger deck, whilst another a very realistic funnel. When we see a good model of the Q.E.II, we recognise it as a model of the Q.E.II, but do not mistake it for the real thing. We can also recognise two different models as being equally good models, even though each has different strengths and weaknesses.

Sociologists do something rather similar when they attempt to represent society. In creating models of society they attempt to represent its important features. Just as with building a model ship, some features of society are inevitably emphasised at the expense of others. So, for example, Marxism places particular emphasis on the conflicts in society whilst functionalists tend to emphasise the degree of consensus in society. Neither gives a complete representation of society, but each draws attention to some of its important features.

A difficulty with this view of sociological theories as

models concerns how we can choose between them. Although sociological theories can often be directly compared with features of the society they represent, and judgements made about their accuracy, sometimes this is not the case. Some theories are rather like a hall of mirrors at a seaside resort. A hall of mirrors is a collection of distorting mirrors, some of which make you appear very thin, some very fat and others which grossly distort the proportions of your body. Of course, we know that our bodies are being distorted by these mirrors because we have seen our reflections in ordinary mirrors.

Similarly, sociological theories can function like a hall of mirrors. Each provides a different representation of society. But, since we do not know which mirror gives the true representation, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for us to select the most accurate image. For this reason, choosing between competing sociological theories can be one of the most challenging, but also one of the most interesting, tasks facing the sociologist.

1.2 Sociological theories as propositions

Although it might be difficult to choose which competing sociological theory gives us the best representation of society, it is important that we try to find ways of doing so. If we did not, and simply decided to regard each theory as a different but equally valid representation of society, we would face some serious difficulties.

The idea that competing theories are merely different but equally valid views is often called *relativism*. The chief difficulty with relativism is that it can lead to conclusions which are logically impossible. This is sometimes referred to as the problem of *incoherence*. Consider the following example of a relativist argument: 'the feminist claim that the most fundamental divisions in society are those of gender is a different but equally valid argument as the Marxist claim that the most fundamental divisions in society are those of class'.

The problem is this – the most fundamental divisions in society cannot be *both* those of class and gender. One must be, by definition, more fundamental than the other. We could claim the following: 'divisions of class and gender are equally fundamental'. In so doing, however, we would in fact be contradicting both claims in the original argument, because each insists that one division is more fundamental than the other. This shows us that when we are faced with contradictory theories – theories which cannot both be right – we must reject either one or both of the theories.

The question is, therefore, on what basis should we reject or accept any given sociological theory? To begin to see the answer to this, it is important to notice that sociological theories – like other types of theory – usually contain within them what we might call *propositions*. Essentially, a proposition is any statement which purports to say something which is true. Both of the theories we considered above purported to say something which was truthful – that gender was the most fundamental division in society and that class was the most fundamental division in society. Both theories therefore contained propositions. There are basically two ways in which we can evaluate propositions.

Logical evaluation The first of these we could call *logical evaluation*. This concerns the internal validity of the argument we are examining. Do the various elements of the theory fit together in a logically coherent way, or do they contradict each other? We have already examined one example of logical evaluation. We saw that to simultaneously accept the different claims of Marxists and feminists about which divisions in society are the most fundamental is simply illogical. It should therefore be rejected before we even begin to examine the available evidence.

Sometimes a theory might be perfectly logical, but contradicted by some piece of evidence. Consider the following example:

All sociologists vote Labour.
Basil is a sociologist.
Therefore, Basil votes Labour.

Logically, the conclusion, 'Therefore Basil votes Labour' follows from the premises of this argument. It may well be, however, that each statement within the argument is untrue – not all sociologists vote Labour and Basil could be an accountant who votes for the Natural Law Party.

Similarly, some or all of the elements of an argument could be perfectly true, but the argument itself is logically flawed. Consider the following:

The first professor of sociology was French.
Durkheim was the first professor of sociology.
Therefore Durkheim wrote a book called Suicide.

Each one of these statements is perfectly true, but taken together the conclusion simply does not follow from what went before. In fact, logically, this 'argument' is nonsense, even though each of its elements is perfectly true.

These examples show us is that it is just as important to pay attention to the form of an argument as it is to the truth of its various elements. Clearly, however, the logical validity of any particular sociological argument is not the only criterion by which it should be evaluated.

Empirical evaluation As well as a theory's logical validity, we should also be concerned about the truth of the specific propositions it contains. If we cannot accept on logical grounds the argument that Marxism and feminism present equally valid views of which are the most fundamental social divisions, then we are still left with the need to decide which divisions are in fact most fundamental. Somewhat obviously, we need to do this by comparing the various claims being made with the social reality they are purporting to describe. This task we can call *empirical evaluation*.

As you will have seen in the chapter on methodology, sociologists have devised many ingenious methods of gathering data about social phenomena. Let us take just

one to illustrate the example we are considering. Imagine we decide to try to settle the dispute between Marxists and feminists by conducting a series of interviews with a carefully selected sample of individuals. Imagine we ask working-class women which group they feel they have most in common with – working-class men, or upper-class women. If the majority choose upper-class women, then we might conclude that the feminist theory is the most accurate, in that gender is being identified by the respondents as the most important variable. If the majority choose the working-class men, then we would perhaps conclude that the Marxist point of view is the most accurate, since class has been identified as the most important variable.

Whilst at first sight this appears to be a straightforward way of settling disputes between theories, there is in fact a serious problem with it. Marxists, faced with the evidence that most people regard gender as the most important division in society, could easily argue that this result has arisen from the false consciousness of the respondents. In other words, those people interviewed falsely believed gender to be most important because such a belief serves the interests of the capitalist ruling class. Marxists might therefore argue that in reality it is class which is most important, even though people do not generally recognise this.

This last example illustrates a very important point about the relationship between sociological theories and empirical evidence. Whilst theories certainly make statements about the real world which they claim to be true, they also often contain their own standards by which these statements should be evaluated. In other words, some piece of empirical evidence might be accepted as valid by supporters of one theory, but not by supporters of another. What this means is that sociological theories cannot always be straightforwardly tested by obtaining empirical evidence, as the validity and relevance of this evidence may always be challenged by supporters of the theory in question.

We have tried in this section to show that sociological theories need to be evaluated both logically and empirically, but that the latter may not always be straightforward because there exists a complex relationship between theories and empirical evidence. We now turn to a consideration of the origins of sociological theory in the ideas of the Enlightenment, and the writings of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

key terms

Model A representation of something.
Proposition A statement which claims to be true.
Relativism In this context, the view that theories are different but equally valid.
Logical evaluation Evaluating a theory to see if its logic is sound. For example, do its propositions contradict each other?
Empirical evaluation Evaluating a theory in terms of evidence. For example, does the evidence support the theory?
False consciousness A false or distorted view of the world.

activity1 life of Galileo

Brecht wrote *Life of Galileo* in 1938. Galileo was a 17th century scientist whose discoveries challenged the Ptolemaic model of the universe which placed the earth at the centre of the universe, a view supported by the Church. Galileo's discoveries also challenged the ideas of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle which were still influential. In this extract from Scene 4, Galileo is trying to persuade court scholars of the significance of his discoveries.

GALILEO *at the telescope:* As your highness no doubt realises, we astronomers have been running into great difficulties in our calculations for some while. We have been using a very ancient system which is apparently consistent with our philosophy but not, alas, with the facts. Would you gentlemen care to start by observing these satellites of Jupiter, the Medician stars?

ANDREA (the housekeeper's son) *indicating the stool by the telescope:* Kindly sit here.

PHILOSOPHER: Thank you, my boy. I fear things are not quite so simple. Mr Galileo, before turning to your famous tube, I wonder if we might have the pleasure of a disputation?

Galileo displays his telescope to Florentine nobles.

Its subject to be: Can such planets exist?

MATHEMATICIAN: A formal dispute.

GALILEO: I was thinking you could just look through the telescope and convince yourselves?

ANDREA: This way, please.

MATHEMATICIAN: Of course, of course. I take it you are

familiar with the opinion of the ancients that there can be no stars which turn round centres other than the earth, nor any which lack support in the sky?

GALILEO: I am.

PHILOSOPHER: Moreover, quite apart from the very possibility of such stars, which our mathematicians – he turns towards the mathematician – would appear to doubt, I would like in all humility to pose the philosophical question: are such stars necessary? The universe of the divine Aristotle, with the mystical music of its spheres and its crystal vaults, the orbits of its heavenly bodies, the slanting angle of the sun's course, the secrets of the moon tables, the starry richness catalogued in the southern hemisphere and the transparent structure of the celestial globe add up to an edifice of such exquisite proportions that we should think twice before disrupting its harmony.

GALILEO: How about your highness now taking a look at his impossible and unnecessary stars through this telescope?

MATHEMATICIAN: One might be tempted to answer that, if your tube shows something which cannot be there, it cannot be an entirely reliable tube, wouldn't you say?

GALILEO: What d'you mean by that?

MATHEMATICIAN: It would be rather more appropriate, Mr Galileo, if you were to name your reasons for assuming that there could be free-floating stars moving about in the highest sphere of the unalterable heavens.

PHILOSOPHER: Your reasons, Mr Galileo, your reasons.

GALILEO: My reasons! When a single glance at the stars themselves and my own notes makes the phenomenon evident? Sir, your disputation is becoming absurd.

MATHEMATICIAN: If one could be sure of not over-exciting you, one might say that what is in your tube and what is in the skies is not necessarily the same thing.

PHILOSOPHER: That couldn't be more courteously put.

FEDERZONI: They think we painted the Medicean stars on the lens.

GALILEO: Are you saying I'm a fraud?

PHILOSOPHER: How could we? In his highness's presence too.

MATHEMATICIAN: Let's not beat about the bush. Sooner or later Mr Galileo will have to reconcile himself to the facts. Those Jupiter satellites of his would penetrate the crystal spheres. It is as simple as that.

FEDERZONI: You'll be surprised: the crystal spheres don't exist.

PHILOSOPHER: Any textbook will tell you that they do, my good man.

FEDERZONI: Right, then let's have new textbooks.

PHILOSOPHER: Your highness, my distinguished colleague and I are supported by none less than the divine Aristotle himself.

GALILEO *almost obsequiously*: Gentlemen, to believe in the authority of Aristotle is one thing, tangible facts are another. You are saying that according to Aristotle there are crystal spheres up there, so certain motions just cannot take place because the stars would penetrate them. But suppose those motions could be established? Mightn't that suggest to you that those crystal spheres don't exist? Gentlemen, in all humility I ask you to go by the evidence of your eyes.

MATHEMATICIAN: My dear Galileo, I may strike you as very old-fashioned, but I'm in the habit of reading Aristotle now and again, and there, I can assure you, I trust the evidence of my eyes.

GALILEO: I am used to seeing the gentlemen of the various faculties shutting their eyes to every fact and pretending that nothing has happened. I produce my observations and everyone laughs. I offer my telescope so they can see for themselves, and everyone quotes Aristotle.

FEDERZONI: The fellow has no telescope.

MATHEMATICIAN: That's just it.

PHILOSOPHER *grandly*: If Aristotle is going to be dragged in the mud – that's to say an authority recognised not only by every classical scientist but also by the chief fathers of the church – then any prolonging of this discussion is in my view a waste of time.

Adapted from B. Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, 1980

questions

1 a) What reasons does Galileo give for believing his model of the universe?

b) What reasons do the court scholars give for rejecting this model?

2 When sociologists evaluate theories are they likely to draw upon the type of evidence Galileo uses or the type of evidence the court scholars use? Give reasons for your answer.

summary

1. There are two essential elements to sociological theories – models and propositions.
2. Theories can be evaluated in two ways – logical evaluation and empirical evaluation.
3. These types of evaluation are necessary to avoid relativism. Without them, it is not possible to decide between competing theories.
4. Empirical evaluation is problematic because people may have a false consciousness. As a result, evidence based on their statements may not be valid.

Unit 2 Classical sociology and the advent of modernity

keyissues

1 What are the origins of sociological theory?
2 How significant is the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber to the development of sociological theory?

Modernity Sociology, as a distinct form of enquiry, emerged in the 19th century in the wake of 'the so-called "twin revolutions" – the Industrial Revolution of England (and later elsewhere) which occurred roughly between 1780 and 1840 and the Democratic Revolutions of the United States of America in 1776 and France in 1789' (Lee & Newby, 1983). These revolutions signalled a radical transformation in society and the advent of *modernity*. Although the early sociologists characterised the transformation in different ways, they recognised that the modern world – which they saw emerging in their lifetimes – represented a significant break from the past.

There is now widespread agreement over the major features of modernity. They can be grouped under three headings – the economic, the political, and the cultural. Economically, modernity involves the dominance of industrial capitalism; politically, it involves the consolidation of the nation state and, typically, liberal democracy; culturally it involves a stress on reason as opposed to tradition (Jones, 1993).

Responses to modernity The dramatic changes which occurred in North America and Northern Europe in the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century generated very different political responses. For liberals, the changes were welcome. Individuals are naturally rational and should be free to pursue their own interests. The removal of traditional restraints and the emergence of governments which guaranteed the rights of individuals were therefore seen as progressive developments. For socialists, the changes were not unwelcome, but were seen as not going far enough. Human beings are naturally communal and their interests can, therefore, only be met collectively. This necessitates the replacement of capitalism, which divides people, by socialism which enables people to cooperate. In contrast to these two optimistic responses to social change, conservatives exhibited horror. Human beings are naturally members of a social organism – unequal but dependent on each other. The revolutions, in their disregard for tradition and their rupture of the natural order, were seen as dangerous developments.

Liberalism, socialism and conservatism have all influenced the development of sociology. Much 19th century sociology took up the conservative concern with the threat to social order and much subsequent sociology has involved a debate with the ghost of Marx, exhibiting in the process the influence of socialism (Zeitlin, 1971). Liberalism, however, was the most significant in the emergence of sociology as a distinct form of enquiry, because this was the dominant political philosophy of the Enlightenment.

2.1 The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment refers to 'a period in European intellectual history which spans the time from roughly the first quarter to the last quarter of the 18th century. Geographically centred in France, but with important outposts in most of the major European states, the "Enlightenment" is composed of the ideas and writings of a fairly heterogeneous group, who are often called by their French name philosophes' (Hamilton, 1992).

Whatever differences there were between the philosophes, they recognised that they were engaged on a common project. This is evident in their cooperative enterprise – the publication over twenty years of the *Encyclopédie*. This work reflected two shared principles – confidence in the ability of human reason to provide an understanding of the world, and faith in the ability of human beings to use this understanding to improve the world.

The radical nature of these two principles should not be underestimated. They constituted a direct challenge to the traditional conception of the world propagated by the Roman Church. Reason was no longer seen as subservient to divine revelation as interpreted through the teachings of the Roman Church. And history was no longer seen as 'synonymous with God working his purpose out' (Smart, 1992). Instead, stress was placed on the power of human reason to create knowledge, which in turn can be used to improve the human condition. In the process, the Enlightenment brought about a cultural change in what constitutes knowledge and what the purpose of knowledge is. A distinctly modern conception of knowledge was born.

The Enlightenment philosophes systematically developed and popularised among influential members of society ideas which had been originally formulated in an earlier era. Scientific discoveries in the 16th and 17th centuries challenged the traditional religious world view which placed the earth at the centre of the universe. The problem of deciding what constituted the truth was therefore raised in an acute form. Philosophers in the 17th century grappled with this question and came up with two broad answers.

For the *rationalists*, true knowledge was logically deduced from a few basic premises which could not be doubted. Descartes, for example, concluded that however much he doubted, he could be sure of one thing, 'cogito

ergo sum' (I think therefore I am). This constituted for him a firm foundation for knowledge. For the *empiricists*, true knowledge was induced from, that is derived from observations. Berkeley, for example, concluded that 'esse est percipi' (to exist is to be perceived). This constituted for him a firm foundation for knowledge.

Although the rationalists and empiricists (and indeed many of the Enlightenment philosophes) continued to believe in a God, the basis of knowledge was no longer seen as the word of God (as interpreted through the Church) but reason or sensory observation. What the Enlightenment philosophes did was to synthesise these two traditions. 'An understanding or knowledge of natural and social reality was deemed to depend upon a unity of reason and observation, made possible by the practice of scientific methods of inquiry' (Smart, 1992).

Indeed, when 18th century writers talk of the power of human reason they 'meant the scientific method: the deductive reasoning of the mathematical sciences and the inductive, empirical reasoning of the sciences of nature' (Dunthorne, 1991).

The 17th century also witnessed a dispute between the 'ancients' and the 'moderns' over the respective merits of the works of classical antiquity and the more recent thinking of an emerging modern Europe. The view of the 'moderns' that knowledge had grown over time eventually gained ascendancy and paved the way for the Enlightenment to argue that there existed a more general process of social development and that knowledge could be used to promote further progress.

The Enlightenment belief that science was a force for enlightenment and progress generated tremendous optimism. The success of the natural sciences encouraged a belief 'that in the struggle of man against nature the balance of power was shifting in favour of man' (Gay, 1973). Science would enable human beings to gain mastery over nature. And the application of the scientific method to social arrangements would justify the reform of social institutions. In both cases, the result would be the enhancement of human freedom.

The emergence of a sociological perspective can be detected in the Enlightenment. 'For the first time, man could "dare to know" about the social arrangements under which he lived, rather than have them presented to him through the obscuring haze of a religious ideology. By knowing about these social arrangements, their operation would become clear, and thus open to change' (Hamilton, 1992). The philosophes tended not to have a clearly worked out model of society, however. Wedded to the notion that individuals are essentially rational and self sufficient, society was seen as a collection of individuals. It was therefore left to later writers in the 19th century to develop more coherent models of society and to give birth to sociology as a distinct form of enquiry. What is significant is that these writers built on the cultural change which the Enlightenment brought in ways of thinking about society. It is to the work of the three who above all others have established the principal frames of reference of modern sociology – Marx, Durkheim and Weber – that we now turn.

key terms

Rationalists They believed that true knowledge was logically deduced from a few basic premises or statements which were clearly true.

Empiricists They believed that true knowledge was derived from observations – from empirical evidence that could be directly observed.

activity2 the individual and society

Item A A medieval model of the individual and society

Society, like the human body, is an organism composed of different members. Each member has its own function – prayer or defence or merchandise or tilling the soil. Each must receive a means suited to its station and must claim no more. Within classes there must be equality. If one takes into his hand the living of two, his neighbour will go short. Between classes there must be inequality, or otherwise a class cannot perform its function or enjoy its rights.

Adapted from Tawney, 1936

Item B The view of a sixteenth century writer

God made all the parts of the body for the soul and with the soul to serve him and all the subjects in the kingdom to serve their King and with their King to serve him. If the head of the body ache, will not the heart be greatly grieved and every part feel his part of the pain of it. And if a King in his world be displeased then the heart of his kingdom (the hearts of his subjects) will have a feeling of it.

Nicholas Bretton, a 16th century writer

Item C The rise of individualism

The transformations which ushered in modernity tore the individual free from their stable moorings in traditions and structures. Since these were believed to be divinely ordained, they were held not to be subject to fundamental change. One's status, rank and position in the 'great chain of being' – the secular and divine order of things – overshadowed any sense that one was a sovereign individual. The birth of the 'sovereign individual' represented a significant break with the past.

The sovereign individual – the idea that the individual is the centre of the universe, that all things can be traced back to the individual, that the individual sets things in motion, makes the world go round and is the motor of social action and change – was a new idea which only gradually emerged.

Many major movements in Western thought and culture contributed to the emergence of this new conception: the Reformation and Protestantism, which set the individual conscience free from the religious institutions of the Church and exposed it directly to the eye of God; Renaissance humanism, which placed Man at the centre of the universe; the scientific revolutions, which endowed Man with the faculty and capacities to inquire into, investigate and unravel the mysteries of Nature; and the Enlightenment, centred on the image of rational, scientific Man, freed from dogma and intolerance, before whom the whole of human history was laid out for understanding and mastery.

Adapted from Hall, 1992

Item D An Enlightenment model of the individual and society

Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains. Those who think themselves the masters of others are indeed greater slaves than they. How did this transformation come about? I do not know. How can it be made legitimate? That question I believe I can answer. . . . The social order is a sacred right which serves as a basis for all other rights. And as it is not a natural right, it must be one founded on covenants – binding agreements. The problem is to determine what those covenants are.

'How to find a form of association which will defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all, and under which each individual, while uniting himself with the others, obeys no one but himself, and remains as free as before?' This is the fundamental problem to which the social contract holds the solution.

Whichever way we look at it, we always return to the same conclusion: namely that the social pact establishes equality among the citizens in that they all pledge themselves under the same conditions and must all enjoy the same rights.

From J. Rousseau *The Social Contract* quoted in D. Held et al ., 1983

Item E Sir Isaac Newton

William Blake's painting (dated 1795) of the scientist Sir Isaac Newton. Blake portrays him as a godlike figure drawing on a chart beside his underwater grotto.

questions

1 Read Items A and B. How do they portray the relation between the individual and society?

2 Read Item C. How does the relation between the individual and society change with the rise of modernity?

3 Read Item D. How does this Enlightenment model of society differ from that presented in Items A and B?

4 Briefly comment on the painting of Sir Isaac Newton in the light of Items A to D.

2.2 Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Marx did not see himself as a sociologist, but his ideas have been extremely influential within sociology and have in fact formed the basis for a distinct sociological perspective. This perspective is characterised by three central features. First, the starting point for analysing society should always be the material conditions of production – the way people organise the production of goods and services. Second, the motor of social change is class conflict and it is such conflict which propels society forward from one production system to another. Third, the conditions which will enable the working class to replace the modern oppressive productive system by a classless system can be scientifically identified. Marx's support for a scientific approach and his view that this approach can

help society to progress indicate his debt to the Enlightenment.

The materialist conception of history

For Marx, the first priority of human beings is to ensure physical survival by producing the means of subsistence. Unless the provision of food and shelter is met, no other activity is possible. Hence, according to Marx, the way society organises its production is the most fundamental aspect of human existence and it is from this that all other aspects of human activity develop. Thus ideas, which other writers such as Hegel had seen as fundamental for social life, are ultimately dependent upon the way people organise the production of their means of subsistence.

The economic base and social superstructure

In developing his materialist conception of history, Marx distinguished between the *base* and *superstructure* of society. The base consists of the *forces of production* (the tools and machinery, the knowledge and the raw materials which people use in order to produce goods and services) and the *relations of production* (the social relationships between people involved in the production process).

Those parts of the forces of production which can be legally owned, for example land in feudal society and factories in capitalist society, are known as the *means of production*.

Together, the forces and relations of production define the way a society organises its production of goods or services, or *mode of production*. The economic base or dominant mode of production is the bedrock of society and all other social institutions and processes develop from it and are ultimately dependent upon it. As Marx put it, the economic base is 'the real foundation on which legal and political superstructures arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life' (Bottomore & Rubel, 1961).

Let us take an example of one mode of production, feudalism. In societies where this was the dominant mode of production, land was the chief means of production so that ownership of land put the lords in a position of dominance over the serfs who had to work the land in order to survive. Since the serfs did not own the land, they were forced to hand over a proportion of what they produced as tithes to the lords. The rest of the social structure reflected the economic subordination of the serfs to the lords. The legal system obliged serfs to provide military service for their lords and the church justified their exploitation.

Class and social change

Marx was less concerned to offer a description of any particular mode of production than to put forward an account of how it changes and is eventually replaced by another. He distinguished four main modes of production which have succeeded each other. In chronological order they are primitive communism, ancient society, feudalism and capitalism. Apart from primitive communism where people only produce enough to subsist and there is no surplus for a particular group to appropriate, each mode of production is characterised by a particular set of class relations.

Those who own the means of production exploit the labour of those who do not own the means of production. In ancient society masters exploited the labour of slaves whom they owned; in feudal society the lords exploited the labour of serfs who were tied to the land; and in capitalist society the bourgeoisie exploit the labour power of the proletariat who are forced to work for them in order to survive. In each case exploitation leads to class conflict and the eventual replacement of each mode of production.

Class conflict leads to the overthrow of a mode of production because of underlying contradictions which develop within the mode of production between the forces of production and relations of production. The forces of production develop as people discover new ways of mastering nature and generating wealth. There comes a point, however, when their full potential is held back by the existing relations of production. It is then that the conditions are conducive for the class who own the new means of production to rise up and overthrow the old mode of production.

This process can be illustrated by the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Within feudalism, the discovery of new sources of power, such as steam, allowed human beings to master nature more effectively. For this potential to be realised, however, it was essential that people were no longer tied to the land but free to work for those who owned the new sources of power. These were the conditions which encouraged the bourgeoisie to unite and overthrow the feudal relations of production and establish a new mode of production. In Marx's words, 'With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed' (Bottomore & Rubel 1961). Thus the bourgeoisie oust the feudal aristocracy from political power and the culture is transformed as concepts such as freedom replace the dominant concepts of feudalism such as loyalty. The resolution of old contradictions, however, does not mean an end to contradictions. Contradictions develop within the new mode of production – the contradictions of capitalism will eventually lead to its replacement by communism.

The transition from capitalism to communism

Marx's primary concern was to analyse capitalism and identify the conditions which will bring about its downfall. Capitalism can be defined in terms of two interrelated features: a) the production of goods and services is primarily geared to the search for profits which accrue to those people who own the means of production and b) the process is organised in terms of a market in which commodities, including labour power itself, are bought and

sold. As a consequence, capitalism is characterised by two classes – those who own the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and those who do not own the means of production (the proletariat) who are therefore forced to sell their labour power and work for the bourgeoisie.

The relation between these classes is, on the surface, less exploitive than in a feudal society in which people were obliged, for example, to hand over a definite amount of produce to the lord of the manor or to work unpaid on the lord's land. In a capitalist society, workers hire out their energies and skills, in order to produce the goods and services which are eventually sold on the market, in exchange for wages. The exchange, however, is not a fair one. The wages invariably represent less in terms of value than the value realised through the sale of the products of proletarian labour and the difference between the two, which Marx called *surplus value*, is appropriated by the bourgeoisie as profit. For Marx, the relation between the bourgeoisie and proletariat is clearly one of exploitation, and has, as a consequence, the increasing *alienation* of the proletariat.

Alienation 'In what does this alienation consist?' Marx asked. 'First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not a part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfil himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery, not of wellbeing, does not develop freely a physical and mental energy, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker, therefore, feels himself at home during his leisure, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labour. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs. Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion, it is avoided like the plague. Finally, the alienated character of work for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person' (Bottomore & Rubel, 1961).

Crisis and contradiction As capitalism develops, Marx argued, so the conditions for its downfall and replacement become more apparent. Driven by the need to maintain the rate of profit, the bourgeoisie adopts increasingly sophisticated technology, thus creating the possibility for the population as a whole to enjoy a high standard of living and for its members to fulfil themselves. Such an outcome is, however, not possible so long as the bourgeoisie continues to appropriate surplus value for itself. In Marx's terms, the relations of production in a capitalist society prevent the promise of shared material abundance, which the developing forces of production point to, from being fully realised. What is more, the existence of a fundamental imbalance between production and consumption results in periodic crises when the market is unable to absorb all the goods and services which have been produced.

The bourgeoisie, of course, responds to such crises by seeking new markets around the world, thus encouraging in the process European colonial expansion. Economic crises, however, recur and invariably result in bankruptcies. In order to counteract these tendencies to overproduction, capital becomes more concentrated, thus making it increasingly possible for production to be centrally coordinated and orientated to people's needs. However, such an outcome is again not possible so long as the bourgeoisie compete with each other to make profits. For these possibilities to be realised, the revolutionary action of the proletariat is needed.

Class polarisation At first the proletariat's resistance to bourgeois domination is only sporadic. Members are not united but struggle among each other as well as against the bourgeoisie. Over time, however, a combination of circumstances promotes the *class consciousness* of the proletariat. The development of capitalism tends to mean the demise of classes characteristic of the former pre-industrial society – landowners and serfs – and therefore the emergence of a more simplified class structure as the last vestiges of the previous class structure disappear. The existence of a particularly vulnerable and unorganised sector of the labour force, which can be tapped during a boom but disposed of during a slump, described by Marx as 'a reserve army of labour,' tends to mean that wages remain around subsistence levels. As a resut, the relative disparity in wealth between the bourgeoisie and proletariat increases. The introduction of machinery tends to mean the erosion of traditional craft skills and the elimination of skill divisions within the proletariat.

In short, a process of class polarisation occurs, in which the proletariat, less divided and subject to increasing relative poverty, face a clearly distinct bourgeoisie. As they live through the economic crises of capitalism with their attendant increases in unemployment and decreases in wages and as they work concentrated together in large factories, so members of the proletariat communicate to each other their increasing dissatisfaction with bourgeois exploitation. They organise themselves to begin with on a local level, and later on a national level, to improve their wages and conditions until, finally, they are strong enough to oust the bourgeoisie and set up a new society. In the process, they transform themselves from a mere category of people who happen to share the same conditions, to a group of people who, realising they share the same conditions, organise to change them. In Marx's terms, they make the transition from a *class in itself* to a *class for itself*.

Revolutionary change The bourgeoisie of course does attempt to prevent the proletariat from making this transition from a class in itself to a class for itself. Although its power rests ultimately on ownership of the means of production, such economic dominance is translated into political dominance with the result that the bourgeoisie becomes a ruling class. The state, considered by Marx to be 'the executive committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' represents the interests of the class as a whole, managing its common affairs in two major ways. The first relies on its control of the means of

coercion and involves being repressive. Examples here include legislation inhibiting the formation of trade unions and the use of the army to quash strikes. The second depends on the dissemination of beliefs and values throughout society and involves propagating ideologies which purport to show the justice and necessity of bourgeois domination. Particularly because, as Marx put it, 'the ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas: ie the class which is the dominant material force in society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force' (Bottomore & Rubel, 1961). As a result, the development of class consciousness may be delayed.

Ultimately, Marx argued, the proletariat will see through the fog of bourgeois ideology and become revolutionary. For the revolution is inevitable. Marx went even further claiming that the proletarian revolution will be unique. Whereas past revolutions have been made by a minority for the benefit of a minority, the proletariat's revolution will be made by the majority for the benefit of the majority. This will enable a classless society to be formed in which the ideals put forward during the French Revolution will be fully realised – freedom will replace oppression; fulfilment alienation; equality inequality; fraternity self-interest. Such a society Marx called *communism*.

Evaluation

Economic determinism While it is indisputable that Marx saw economic factors as crucial in any analysis of society, it is unlikely that he ever believed, as some argue, that all social development is caused by economic changes. His famous statement 'Men make history but not under circumstances of their own choosing' suggests rather that Marx believed human beings can have an influence on the outcome of events, but that this freedom of action is constrained by the limits set by the development of the economy. Whether Marx placed an undue emphasis on economic factors still remains a contentious issue, however.

Social change The opening line of the *Communist Manifesto*, written by Marx and Engels, states that 'the history of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle'. This suggestion that history has an overall direction and that it is governed by a dynamic principle – the class struggle – is questioned by many contemporary sociologists. What's more, there is some dispute as to whether it's possible to talk of class divisions prior to the advent of capitalism. And whether other social divisions in modern societies are at least as significant as class.

The transition to communism Capitalist societies have not developed in the direction Marx anticipated. Although the 20th century has witnessed the establishment of communist states following revolutions, these have occurred in non-capitalist societies and have failed to fulfil Marx's vision of freedom and equality. What's more, the collapse of communist regions in Eastern Europe since 1989 has led some commentators to argue that Marx's ideas are no longer relevant. Needless to say, Marxists believe that they can explain why capitalist societies have remained resistant to revolution, why communist regimes have collapsed, and why Marx's ideas remain as significant today as they ever were.

key terms

Forces of production The tools, machinery, raw materials and knowledge used to produce goods and services.
Relations of production The social relationships between people involved in the production process – for example, the relationships between employers and employees.
Means of production Those parts of the forces of production that can be legally owned – for example, factories in capitalist society.
Mode of production The forces and relations of production – the economic base of society. The way a society organises its production of goods and services.
Superstructure All other aspects of society – for example, the political and legal systems.
Class conflict The conflict of interest between the two major classes in society – those who own the means of production and those who do not.
Surplus value The difference between the costs of labour and the wealth received from that labour by those who own the means of production. In capitalist society, surplus value is the profits received by the bourgeoisie.
Alienation An alienated worker is cut off from their work, unfulfilled at work, is forced to work, and works for somebody else.
Class consciousness This occurs when the subject class, for example the proletariat, become fully aware of the truth about their situation.
Class polarisation This occurs when the gap in income and wealth between the ruling and subject classes grows steadily wider.
Class in itself People who share the same class position but are not aware of their true situation. They are blinded by false consciousness.
Class for itself People who share the same class position, are aware of their true situation, and organise to change it.
Ideology From a Marxist position, false beliefs and ideas – for example, justifications for the domination of the bourgeoisie.
Communism A classless society in which the means of production are communally owned and people are equal, free from oppression, and fulfilled as human beings.

2.3 Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

Although the word 'sociology' and many of the discipline's founding principles had been established by Auguste Comte (1798-1857), it was Emile Durkheim who finally established sociology as a serious and respectable academic discipline. In particular, it was Durkheim who first offered a formal statement of 'sociological method' in his book *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1964; first published in 1895). Although, as we shall see, Durkheim's approach to the study of society can be subjected to a number of criticisms, its influence on sociology to this day should not be underestimated.

activity3 class and ideology

Item A Clement Atlee, Labour Prime Minister 1945

Now a new Parliament must be elected. The choice is between that same Conservative Party which stands for private enterprise, private profit and private interests and the Labour Party which demands that in peacetime as in war the interests of the whole people should come before that of a section.

Item B Harold MacMillan, Conservative Prime Minister 1959

This election has shown that the class war is obsolete.

Item C Harold Wilson, Labour Prime Minister 1964

Let us be understanding. Let us not condemn them too harshly. For remember that these are men who were sure at birth that they were ordained by providence to rule over their fellow citizens and to find themselves rudely deprived of the powers that they exercised cannot have been easy for them.

Item D Ted Heath, Conservative Prime Minister 1970

Our purpose is not to divide but to unite and where there are differences to bring reconciliation; to create one nation.

Item E Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Prime Minister 1988

In the world in which we now live, divisions into class are outmoded and meaningless. We are all working people who basically want the same things.

Item F John Major, Conservative Prime Minister 1992

I believe that in the next ten years we will have to continue to make changes that will genuinely produce across the whole of this country a genuinely classless society in which people can rise to whatever level that their own abilities and their own good fortune may take them from wherever they started.

Item G Tony Blair, Labour Prime Minister 1997

For year, the economic framework of the British left was dominated by questions of public ownership. Markets were poorly understood, their obvious limits leading the left to neglect their great potential for enhancing choice, quality and innovation. Effective markets are a pre-condition for a successful modern economy. The question is not whether to have them, but how to empower individuals to succeed within them.

Item H Your Country Needs You

questions

1 Read items A to G. What similarities can you detect in these statements by postwar British Prime Ministers. How would Marx account for these similarities?

2 Look at Item H. How does this poster illustrate a similar ideology to that in Items A to G?

Durkheim's methodology – the study of 'social facts'

Durkheim's central methodological principle, first outlined in his *The Rules of Sociological Method,* was as follows: 'Consider social facts as things'. To understand what Durkheim meant by this, and to appreciate its significance, we need to begin by defining his concept of 'the social fact'. For Durkheim, social facts are characterised by two things: first, they must be *external* to the individual, and second, they must *exercise constraint* over the individual. Some examples will help to clarify what is meant by this.

A very obvious example (when we think about it) of a social fact is language. Let us see how language fulfils Durkheim's two criteria. First, language is external to individuals. Although it is perfectly true that it is internal to us in the sense that we all possess an individual knowledge of the language(s) which we speak, it is external to us in the sense that the language we speak was in existence before any one of us was born, and will continue to be in existence after each of us has died. Language is not an individual characteristic or creation. It is shared by and produced by the social group. As such, it is external to the individual.

Second, although we might not feel that language exercises a constraint over us, a moment's reflection will reveal that it certainly does. If we wish to say something to another speaker of the same language as us, we really have no choice but to use certain words as opposed to others. It is thus no use my using the word 'cheval' if I want to talk to a fellow English speaker about a horse – I have little choice but to use the word 'horse', if I want to be understood.

Perhaps Durkheim's best known example of a social fact can be seen in his analysis of suicide. In his book, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1970; first published in 1897), Durkheim shows how the apparently highly individual act of suicide can be analysed as a social fact. First suicide, or rather the suicide rate, can be shown to be external to

individuals by the fact that the suicide rate varies between different social groups, and that this variation remains fairly constant over time. For example, Durkheim noticed that suicide rates were consistently lower in Catholic countries than they were in Protestant countries and that this difference remained stable over relatively long periods of time. Suicide rates thus seemed to be products of social groups, rather than of individuals. Second, the suicide rate could be seen as constraining because the probability that any individual would commit suicide could be shown to vary according to which social groups they belong.

Of course, Durkheim does not claim that the social fact of the suicide rate will tell us which members of a social group will commit suicide. This, he argued, was the proper province of the psychologist. The job of the sociologist was first to identify social facts – such as the suicide rates of various social groups – and second to explain them. (For further discussion of Durkheim's view of social facts, see pages 131-132; for his study of suicide, see pages 131-132 and 264-268).

Cause and function

One of the more important arguments advanced by Durkheim in *The Rules of Sociological* Method was that in explaining social facts it is necessary to distinguish between their causes and their *social functions*. To understand what Durkheim meant by social functions we must consider his so-called 'organismic analogy' – the idea that societies are like living organisms.

To see how this analogy works consider the following example. If I take a living organism, say a dog, each of its parts – its legs, its tail, its liver, its heart and so on – can be seen to make a contribution to the dog's overall functioning. However, if I were to take any one of these parts in isolation, say its tail, it would 'do' very little, and I would be unable to see how it makes a contribution to the overall functioning of the dog. It only makes sense, as it were, in relation to all the other parts which go to make up the dog. Even if I took all the individual parts of a dog, and placed them in a box, I still would not have something we could meaningfully call 'a dog', which barked and wagged its tail. All I would have would be a pile of lifeless limbs and organs. Similarly, Durkheim argued that only by examining the contribution which each of a society's parts makes to its overall functioning can we arrive at a complete understanding of these parts. This approach is sometimes known as holism, and can be summed up in the phrase: *the whole is greater than the sum of its parts*.

For Durkheim, the study of any social fact's functions must be different from the study of its causes. This is because unless we were to say that a particular social fact was the result of deliberate intentions, its cause cannot be the same as its functional effects. The reason for this is obvious – since functional effects occur only *after* a phenomenon has come into existence, they cannot have caused that phenomenon to come into existence in the first place. Durkheim therefore claimed that the causes of social facts should be sought in other social facts which had occurred at an earlier point in time. If, however, we wish to explain why a social fact persists over time, we should seek to discover the contribution it makes to the overall working of society, in short, its *function*.

The division of labour

Moral regulation At the centre of Durkheim's work is a concern with morality. Morality can be seen as a classic example of a social fact. Moral codes are external to individuals in the sense that they are properties of social groups, and they are constraining over individuals in that they plainly influence our behaviour. But for Durkheim morality is also central to his understanding of how social order is possible.

At the centre of Durkheim's analysis, as with most social theorists, are a set of assumptions about 'human nature'. For Durkheim, following the philosopher Rousseau, human beings possess an innate tendency towards limitless desire. If these desires remain unchecked then, Durkheim argued, human beings could never be happy, because their desires would always outstrip their ability to satisfy them. At the same time, such limitless desires would pose an obvious threat to social order. Durkheim thus argued that human happiness, social order and social solidarity could only be achieved by the regulation of human desires to within attainable limits. It is for this reason that morality – the social fact responsible for the regulation of individual desires – was so central to Durkheim's whole approach.

Social solidarity In his first major work, *The Division of Labour in Society* (1933; first published 1893) Durkheim set out to show how, as societies developed from simple, small-scale pre-literate forms, to modern, complex and industrial forms, the basis of moral regulation, and hence of social solidarity, also underwent change. In the former type of society, Durkheim argued that social order was achieved by what he termed *mechanical solidarity*. In such societies, the extent to which different individuals perform different tasks – the *division of labour* – was very limited. Therefore, since most people shared a common set of interests and problems, a single set of moral rules to guide them was sufficient. The source of such moral regulation was religious, and Durkheim assumed that members of such societies shared a common commitment to the authority of their religion which provided appropriate moral limits in any situation they were likely to face. This he called the 'conscience collective', which roughly translates as the 'collective conscience'.

The basis of the mechanical solidarity of small-scale societies is *similarity* – the division of labour is limited and there is little role differentiation. As the division of labour becomes increasingly specialised and complex, *mechanical solidarity* is replaced by *organic solidarity*. This organic solidarity is based on *difference*. The different and specialised parts of the division of labour work together to maintain the social unit. Specialised occupational roles are interdependent – they need each other.

Anomie As societies became more complex, however, Durkheim argued that the ability of a single source of moral authority to regulate the increasingly divergent lives of society's members was gradually weakened. So much so that modern societies, which are characterised by a very highly developed division of labour, faced a chronic state of crisis as far as moral regulation was concerned. Durkheim called this lack of moral regulation *anomie*, and this is closely linked to his belief in the growth of excessive individualism – people come to see themselves first and foremost as individuals rather than as members of social groups.

Although Durkheim regarded anomie as a very significant feature of modern societies, he maintained that it could be overcome by the development of strong occupational associations which would become the source of moral regulation for their members. For example, they would regulate terms and conditions of employment and wages and salaries. These associations, Durkheim argued, would overcome the problems posed by modern societies in two main ways. First, they would counter the modern trend towards individualism by integrating their members into a social group. Second, they would set limits on the rewards which members of society could expect to receive, and hence would serve to limit desires to within attainable bounds.

Evaluation

Although there can be little doubt about Durkheim's enormous influence on the development of sociology, we need to take account of a number of criticisms of his work.

Anomie and human nature It can be argued that Durkheim's view of human nature is unrealistically pessimistic. In many ways, his argument that human beings need to be morally regulated by society is the direct opposite of Marx's view that human nature is in fact corrupted by the social relations of production in capitalist societies.

Determinism It is sometimes said that Durkheim's approach represents an extreme form of *determinism*. That is, human actions are explained purely by the effects of external forces acting upon the individual. It has been argued that this can be seen in his analysis of suicide – apparently one of the most individual choices a human being can ever make. Durkheim claims that the suicide rate is, in fact, nothing more than a product of social forces over which individuals have absolutely no control. Many sociologists, most notably perhaps symbolic interactionists whose ideas we consider later in this chapter, have argued that this presents an inaccurate picture of human action. Instead, they argue that although social forces perhaps influence individual choices, they do not determine them in a straightforward way. Human beings, they argue, possess freedom of choice, and so can always resist the influences of social forces if they so choose.

Power and inequality Durkheim was extremely concerned about the consequences of the increasingly specialised division of labour – the inequalities which it entails and the anomie it generates. However, it is sometimes argued that he failed to grasp the extent to which modern capitalist societies are composed of groups with fundamentally opposing interests. Marx considered capitalist societies to be characterised by irresolvable class conflicts. Durkheim regarded such conflicts as did occur to be temporary anomalies which could be overcome by the development of new forms of moral regulation. At no time, however, does he consider that the moral regulations which are central to all forms of social solidarity might be ideologies – that is, sets of beliefs which portray a false picture of reality and justify fundamentally unjust power relations.

Whilst each of these criticisms might be convincing to some sociologists, it is important to note that we cannot settle any of them simply by appealing to available evidence. Each point of view presented reflects, in large measure, simply different ways of 'seeing' society. To return to our earlier analogy, each is viewing society in a different distorting mirror. They do, nevertheless, sensitise us to possible weaknesses in Durkheim's approach. We shall return to some of these later in the chapter when we consider the development of functionalism after Durkheim.

key terms

Social facts Aspects of society which are external to the individual and constrain their behaviour.
Holism A view which states that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
Function/social function The contribution made by a social fact to the operation of society as a whole.
Mechanical solidarity A form of moral regulation based on shared values. The 'collective conscience' which unites members of society.
Organic solidarity A form of solidarity based on the interdependence of a specialised division of labour.
Anomie A lack of moral regulation, normlessness.

2.4 Max Weber (1864-1920)

Durkheim's approach to the study of society rested firmly upon his assumption of the effects of external and constraining social facts on individual behaviour, Max Weber emphasised the importance of taking into account the points of view of social actors, and the meanings which they attribute to their own behaviour and that of others. For this reason, Weber is often regarded as the founding father of *interpretivist sociology*, or of the *social action approach* within sociology.

Meaning and the concept of verstehen

As we saw in the previous section, Durkheim regarded the proper task of sociology to be the identification of relationships between social facts. It is often argued, however, that this approach ignores the *meaningful* nature of human conduct. Let us examine what is meant by this.

activity4 the case of Robinson Crusoe

Item A Shipwrecked

In 1719, the novelist Daniel Defoe published a classic story about a man on his own, called Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe went out from England to make his fortune and had many adventures before being shipwrecked on a desert island. He was the only survivor of the wreck, and though he managed to salvage many things from it and to make himself some sort of life on the island, he survived entirely alone until he discovered a single footprint in the sand. This was the mark of a native whom he discovered and named 'Friday' (after the day on which he found him) and made him his servant. Crusoe was finally rescued and taken home.

Item B Family

Born in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who first settled at Hull. He got a good estate by merchandise, and leaving off his trade lived afterwards at York, from whence he married my mother from a very good family in that country.

Item C Education

My father had given me a competent share of learning, as far as house education and a county free-school generally goes, and designed me for the law. Being the third son of the family and not bred to any trade, my head began to be filled with early rambling thoughts.

Robinson Crusoe pictured in the first edition, 1719

Item D Religion

I frequently sat down with thankfulness and admired the hand of God's providence, which had thus spread my table in the wilderness. These reflections made me very sensible of the goodness of Providence to me and very thankful for my present condition.

Item E Power

In a little time I began to speak to him and to teach him how to speak to me; and first I made him know his name should be Friday, which was the day I saved his life. I likewise taught him to say Master, and then let him know that was to be my name.

Item F A social being

Robinson Crusoe was indeed a unique individual, making his way in the world by his own efforts, 'master of all he surveys', as the poem puts it. But this is very different from saying that he can be understood and explained in individual terms. We can't fully explain who he is, where he comes from, what he thinks and does, how he behaves, by looking at him simply as an individual. This is the problem with individualist types of explanation.

Adapted from Hall, 1993

questions

1 What social facts influenced Robinson Crusoe?

2 Is there an argument for combining social and individual explanations to understand Robinson Crusoe's behaviour?

If we are concerned to identify what it is that distinguishes human beings from either animals or inanimate objects, then perhaps the most crucial difference is that human beings are capable of intentional action. We do things on purpose, in order to reach some goal, and usually we have some choice both about the goal and the means we select to achieve it. For example, if asked why you are reading this chapter, you will probably answer with reference to some goal – to enable you to pass an examination in sociology, perhaps. You will also, presumably, have some choice about both the goal and the means you have selected to achieve it – you could always decide not to take the examination, and you could always choose to read another book. It is for this reason that Weber would say that your action is meaningful. It is not merely the product of the operation of external forces over which you have no control, but is the result of your own interpretations of the world around you and of the conscious choices you make about your future.

Weber thus emphasised that it is not enough merely to note statistical correlations between social facts as Durkheim had done – although Weber certainly believed that such correlations were an important starting point for sociological analysis. He insisted, in addition, that explanations of human action should be grasped on the level of meaning. Whilst, methodologically, it may not be difficult to explore the meanings of actors' conduct when one has the opportunity to interview them – although

Weber did not himself practice this kind of sociological investigation – obvious difficulties are faced when one is dealing with social events which took place in the past. Since Weber's own preoccupation was with the origins of modern capitalism, he had himself to overcome this difficulty. The events he was concerned with had taken place several centuries before he was born. His solution was the method of *verstehen*.

Verstehen can be translated from the German as broadly meaning 'empathetic understanding'. In simple terms, one attempts to imagine how the world would have looked from the point of view of the actors whose actions one wishes to understand, even where such a point of view is quite alien to one's own. The classic example of the application of verstehen can be found in Weber's account of the behaviour of early Calvinists in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958). (For further discussion of Weber's methodology, see pages 136-137; for his study of Protestantism and capitalism, see pages 17, 19-20).

The ideal type

Before we move on to consider the ways in which Weber categorised social action, it will be helpful to explain his concept of the *ideal type*. Ideal types are generalisations which help researchers to organise and classify their findings. Rarely, if ever, are they found in their pure form, but they provide us with a set of categories through which we can make sense of our observations. For example, Weber produced an ideal type of a bureaucracy. He lists six 'ideal' characteristics of bureaucracies, but it is unlikely that any actual bureaucratic organisation will possess all six characteristics in pure form. We can nevertheless identify it as a bureaucracy, because it comes closer to the ideal typical bureaucracy than to any other form of organisation.

Types of action

Both the concept of verstehen, and Weber's use of ideal types can be seen in his four-fold categorisation of types of action. These categories of action begin from the assumptions of verstehen in that they adopt the point of view of the actor. They are ideal types in that they are theoretically pure forms to which real instances of action only ever approximate.

Instrumentally rational action In this type of 'purely' rational action, the actor assesses both their goals and the means by which these should be achieved. For example, if it is my goal to win a marathon, then it would be instrumentally rational for me to undergo a strict regime of training and dieting prior to the race. By contrast, it would not be rational, in relation to this goal, for me to spend the weeks prior to the race indulging in an almost incessant orgy of drinking, smoking and over-eating. However, it would still be instrumentally rational for me to decide that the costs (in terms of pain and suffering) of dieting and training were not worth the benefit of winning the marathon. Under these circumstances, I would simply reject the goal of winning the marathon, thus making my over-indulgent behaviour rational in terms of my revised goal of gaining as much immediate pleasure as possible.

Value-rational action This type of rational action is similar to instrumentally rational action in that means are judged to be rational if they are thought to be successful in reaching the goal towards which they are directed. However, in this case, the goals cannot be abandoned even if they are immensely difficult to achieve. For example, a devoutly religious person who believed that they would only enjoy salvation if they lived a life of celibacy would, if acting in accordance with value-rationality, accept a life of celibacy no matter how difficult this might prove. To reject the goal as being simply too difficult to achieve, however, would be an example of instrumentally rational action.

Traditional action This form of action does not involve the assessment of either goals or means. Instead, it is performed simply because tradition dictates that it should be. Although Weber felt that traditional action had declined in significance in modern societies, which he believed were characterised increasingly by rational action, examples of traditional conduct can still be found. In Britain, for example, it is still usual to celebrate Christmas by, amongst other things, purchasing and decorating a Christmas tree. The majority of people who engage in this behaviour, however, can give no reason for doing so other than the fact that it is 'traditional'.

Affective action This final form of action can best be expressed as being a result of emotion. Again, Weber felt that this type of action was becoming less significant in modern societies, but examples can still be found. Someone hearing the news that a close relative had been killed in an accident might burst into tears out of grief. Or, a wife discovering her husband's infidelity might assault him out of anger. No well thought out goals are involved in such actions. And since the circumstances are by definition novel, the actions can clearly not be described as traditional. They are the direct result of the unusual emotional state of the actor.

Rationalisation and disenchantment

Weber argued that modern societies are characterised increasingly by a process of *rationalisation*. As the term suggests, this means that the world is increasingly governed by rationality, in which traditional and affective forms of action are replaced by predominantly rational forms. Organisations increasingly adopt a bureaucratic form and legitimate authority is predominantly rational legal (see page 63). Corresponding to this was a trend towards what is usually translated from the German as *disenchantment*, although a more literal translation of Weber would be *the driving out of magic from things*. This can be seen partly as *secularisation*, but is in fact broader than this and includes the progressive removal of non-rational elements from all spheres of life. Weber was fearful that in the process warmth and humanity might be driven out of social life – the very things which give meaning to human existence (see pages 19-20 and 57).

Evaluation

Psychologism Whilst Durkheim has often been accused of ignoring the role of psychological factors in human behaviour, it has sometimes been said that Weber over-emphasises the role of such factors. This criticism has two aspects to it. First, it has been suggested that in using the method of verstehen, Weber is forced to go beyond available evidence and attribute motives to social actors without any means of verifying them. Taken to its extreme, this could reduce sociological enquiry to little more than guesswork. Second, it can be argued that, in giving such weight to individual motives, Weber underestimates the power of external social forces to constrain and determine behaviour.

Ambiguity Although Weber makes a great effort to be clear about exactly what he means by the ideal type, it can nevertheless be argued that the concept can lead to certain ambiguities, particularly when applied to types of action. Percy Cohen points out, for example, that many forms of traditional action may also conform to one or other type of rationality (Cohen, 1968). For instance, when people in small-scale non-literate societies give gifts to the village headman, they do so both because it is traditional *and* because they hope to receive some benefits as a result. Similarly, whilst an outburst of rage might appear to be purely affective, it could be seen, from the point of view of a psychoanalyst, as rational in that it could have been motivated by an unconscious desire to reduce one's level of stress.

Conclusion

In this unit, we have considered some of the most important early influences on the development of sociological theory. Although each has been subjected to criticism, the ideas we have discussed have had an enduring influence on the ways in which sociologists seek to understand human societies. In the unit which follows, we turn our attention to the ways in which these founding theorists' ideas have been developed by later generations of social theorists.

key terms

Verstehen Empathetic understanding. A method used to interpret the meanings and motives which guide action.
Ideal type A classification of something into 'pure' types – for example, Weber's types of action.
Instrumentally rational action Action in which both goals and the means to attain them are rationally assessed.
Value-rational action The goals are fixed and the means are rationally assessed.
Traditional action Both goals and means are fixed by tradition.
Affective action Action is directed by emotion, with no clearly defined goals.
Rationalisation A process by which the world is increasingly governed by rational thought and action.
Disenchantment The removal of religion, 'magic', warmth and humanity in an increasingly rational world.
Secularisation A process by which religion loses its power and influence in society.

summary

1. Sociology has its roots in the Enlightenment. It reflected two key aspects of Enlightenment thought.
   - The ability of human reason to provide an understanding of the world.
   - A belief that this understanding can be used to improve the world.
2. Marx saw the material conditions of production – the way people organise the production of goods and services – as the starting point for the analysis of society.
3. The mode of production largely shapes the rest of society – that is the superstructure, which includes political and legal systems, religion, and so on.
4. Apart from primitive communism, all societies have a dominant ruling class which exploits a subordinate subject class. The power of the ruling class derives from their ownership and control of the means of production.
5. Class conflict provides the motor for social change. It propels society forward from one production system to another.
6. There is increasing alienation and class polarisation in capitalist society. This will promote class consciousness and help to unite the proletariat. This, in turn, will eventually lead to the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by communism.
7. Marx has been criticised for:
   - What some see as economic determinism
   - Overestimating the importance of class in directing social change
   - Failing to predict the development of capitalist societies.
8. Durkheim saw sociology as the study of social facts. Social facts are external to the individual and constrain individual behaviour.
9. In explaining social facts, it is necessary to distinguish between their causes and their functions. Causes should be sought in other social facts which occurred at an earlier point in time. In order to explain why a social fact persists over time, we need to discover its function – the contribution it makes to society.
10. Durkheim's work focused on moral regulation and its contribution to social solidarity and social order.
11. He distinguished between two types of solidarity – mechanical solidarity based on common values and a limited division of labour, and organic solidarity based on a specialised division of labour.
12. Durkheim saw anomie – a lack of moral regulation – as characteristic of modern society.
13. Durkheim has had an enormous influence on the development of sociology. However, he has been criticised for:
    - Over-emphasising human beings' need for moral regulation
    - Determinism – external forces shaping behaviour
    - A failure to appreciate the significance of conflict in society – particularly class conflict.
14. Weber argued that in order to understand and explain

behaviour, it is essential to discover the meanings which social actors give both to their own actions and the actions of others.

15. To discover these meanings, Weber used the method of verstehen – empathetic understanding.
16. Using this method, Weber identified four types of action. They are ideal types.
    - Instrumentally rational action
    - Value-rational action
    - Traditional action
    - Affective action.
17. Weber saw a process of rationalisation occurring in modern societies – action is increasingly rational rather than traditional or affective. Related to this is a trend towards disenchantment.
18. Like Marx and Durkheim, Weber has had a lasting and significant influence on sociology. However his approach has been criticised for:
    - Attributing motives and meanings to social actors without sufficient means of verifying them
    - Underestimating the power of external social forces to direct behaviour
    - Failing to recognise that certain forms of behaviour can be directed by two or more of the types of social action he identifies.

activity5 disenchantment

Item A Modernity and religion

Modernity is the transition from fate to choice. At the same time, it dissolves the commitments and loyalties that once lay behind our choices. Technical reason has made us masters of matching means to ends. But it has left us inarticulate as to why we should choose one end rather than another. The values that once led us to regard one as intrinsically better than another – and which gave such weight to words like good and bad – have disintegrated, along with the communities and religious traditions in which we learned them. Now we choose because it is what we want; or it works for us; or it feels right to me. Once we have dismantled a world in which larger virtues held sway, what is left are success and self-expression, the key values of an individualistic culture.

Max Weber delivered the famous prophetic warning that the cloak of material prosperity might eventually become an iron cage. It was already becoming an end in itself, and other values were left, in his words, 'like the ghost of dead religious beliefs'. Once capitalism consumed its religious foundations, he feared the consequences.

In the past, disadvantaged groups could find in religion what Karl Marx called 'the feeling of a heartless world'. A purely economic order offers no such consolations. A culture of success places little value on the unsuccessful.

The erosion of those bonds of loyalty and love which religion supported has left us increasingly alone in an impersonal economic and social system. Emile Durkheim was the first to give this condition a name. He called it anomie: the situation in which individuals have lost their moorings in a collective order. It is the heavy price we pay for our loss of communities of faith.

Adapted from Sachs, 1990

Item B Pictures of modernity

The shopping mall – a temple to materialism and consumerism

Former church, now Cottiers Bar and Restaurant, Glasgow

Item C The logical song

When I was young, it seemed that life was so wonderful,
A miracle, oh it was beautiful, magical.
And all the birds in the trees, well they'd be singing so happily,
Joyfully, playfully watching me.
But then they sent me away to teach me how to be sensible,
Logical, responsible, practical.
And they showed me a world where I could be so dependable,
Clinical, intellectual, cynical.

From *Breakfast in America* by Supertramp, 1979, words and music by Roger Hodgson

questions

1 How do Items A, B and C illustrate Weber's belief that rationalisation is resulting in disenchantment?

2 Judging from Item A, what similarities and differences are there between Weber's picture of modernity and those of Marx and Durkheim?

Unit 3 The establishment of sociological theory

keyissues

1. What are the main assumptions of functionalism, Marxism and symbolic interactionism?
2. How significant are these perspectives for the development of sociological theory?

There has never been one model of society on which all sociologists are agreed. In this unit we shall be considering three competing models which have their origins in the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. The three models which we shall consider – functionalism, Marxism and symbolic interactionism – each make very different assumptions about the nature of human beings and the societies which they inhabit. Although these are not the only models which have emerged in sociology, and some sociologists straddle different models, they are nevertheless three of the most significant in the development of sociology as a discipline. This is evident both in this book, where continual references are made to these models, and in any of the major textbooks in sociology. Although, as we shall see in later sections, matters are now more complex than a consideration of these three models suggests, they do nonetheless form the basis of the modern discipline.

3.1 Functionalism

During the first half of the twentieth century, functionalism became the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology. Functionalism has its origins in the work of such 19th century social theorists as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, but owes most to the work of Emile Durkheim. Functionalism was subsequently adopted by sociologists, but much of its early impact was through the work of British social anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown.

Social systems Although the views of functionalist sociologists differ in detail, they share in common a concern with studying societies as *systems*. The idea that a society is a system has a number of implications, which are central to functionalist analysis. First, is the assumption that societies should be studied as wholes, rather than as collections of independent parts. As we saw in Durkheim's work, just as a living organism is more than merely the sum of its constituent parts, so societies need to be treated as entities in their own right with, as it were, a life of their own.

Second, and following from this, is the assumption that the parts of society need to be understood in terms of the contribution which they make to the functioning of the whole. If, for example, we were to be interested in central heating systems, we could only understand the role of, say, the radiators, in relation to the system as a whole. On their own radiators do very little, and had we never seen one as part of a functioning central heating system, we would stand little chance of figuring out what they are for. In exactly the same way, functionalists assume that we can only understand the role of the constituent parts of societies in terms of their contribution to the functioning of the society as a whole.

Third is the assumption that parts of societies perform a primarily positive function in relation to the overall functioning of the society. Just as we would not expect to find parts of central heating systems which either perform no function whatsoever, or actually impair the overall performance of the system, so functionalists would not expect to find parts of societies which either do not contribute to, or actually impair their overall functioning. This means that functionalist analysis tends to search for positive functions of social institutions, whilst either denying or seriously underplaying, their negative or disruptive aspects.

Although by the 1950s, functionalism had become the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology, this dominance was not to last. From this time onwards, functionalism was subjected to a range of criticisms which ultimately led to its widespread rejection. Nevertheless, the influence of functionalism on modern sociological theory remains substantial.

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979)

Although Parsons' work is often criticised for what some see as its rather dry and obscure style, it represents the fullest and most systematic statement of functionalist theory available. For Parsons, as with Durkheim before him, the central problem for all social theory was, in the name of the 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the 'Hobbesian problem of order'. Hobbes believed that human beings were driven by passions which, if left unrestrained, would lead to social chaos, or a 'war of all against all'. The problem, therefore, was how to explain the fact that this state of affairs does not routinely occur in human societies. Indeed, human societies are, for most of the time, rather orderly and peaceful places. Hobbes' solution to this problem was to assume that, driven ultimately by the need for self-preservation, people voluntarily agree to restrain their passions and submit to the sovereign authority of the state.

As we saw in the discussion of Durkheim's work, he offered the rather different solution that social order is maintained by a shared commitment to a common morality. This, essentially, was Parsons' solution too.

The social system and its functional prerequisites

It was suggested in the introduction to this unit that the assumption that societies are systems is fundamental to functionalist theory. This assumption is made most explicitly in the work of Parsons – indeed, his major statement of functionalist theory is presented in a book entitled *The Social System* (Parsons, 1951). For Parsons, any social system inevitably faces four problems, which must be solved if the system is to survive. Parsons calls these four problems *functional prerequisites*, and they are as follows: adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance or latency.

Adaptation The first, *adaptation*, refers to the need for any social system to adapt to its environment. In even the most simple societies, some mechanism must exist whereby food and shelter are obtained. This could involve, for example, hunting and gathering and the production of simple shelters against the elements. Such activities might strike us as straightforward in comparison with the complex arrangements which exist in our own societies for converting the raw materials of the natural environment into produced goods for consumption and use. They do nevertheless require social organisation, and crucially for Parsons, normative regulation. Whilst in simple societies this might be achieved by the existence of customs and norms, in advanced industrial societies it tends to be achieved by legally regulated economies.

Goal attainment The second of Parsons' functional prerequisites is *goal attainment*. This refers to the need for societies to set goals towards which the activities of their members and institutions are directed. In simple societies, this might revolve around the need to obtain sufficient food, whilst in societies such as our own, it involves more complex economic goals such as seeking profit. In modern societies, goal attainment is fundamentally the responsibility of the political system, which establishes a legal and economic framework which regulates and directs the pursuit of such goals.

Integration The third functional prerequisite is *integration*. This refers to the need to maintain cohesion within the social system and to deal effectively with deviance which threatens the overall stability of the system. Whilst in simple societies this function would be fulfilled largely as a result of what Weber called traditional authority, in modern complex societies it is performed largely by the legal system – what Weber called rational-legal authority.

Pattern maintenance The final functional prerequisite is *pattern maintenance*, or *latency.* This refers to the need to maintain the pattern of value commitments amongst a society's members. Crucial to this is the process of socialisation which takes place within institutions such as the family and the education system. Socialisation serves to internalise a society's values into the personalities of individual actors.

This framework allowed Parsons to classify all the parts of any given society into one of these four categories, and in doing so, to claim that each contributes in at least one of these four ways to the overall functioning of that society.

Social evolution and equilibrium

It is sometimes said that functionalism in general, and Parsons' theory in particular, emphasise social stability to such an extent that they are in danger of failing to account for social change. We shall return to this charge in our evaluation of functionalism. For the present, it is important to note that Parsons does not ignore the issue of social change, but in fact makes its explanation a central part of his general theory.

Equilibrium An important element of Parsons' analysis of social systems is that they exist in a state of *equilibrium*. Equilibrium is best defined as 'balance', and in relation to social systems, refers to the ways in which the four subsystems are interrelated. This means, for Parsons, that a change in one part of a social system tends to produce changes elsewhere in the social system such that the system, overall, returns to a state of equilibrium. Social systems are therefore regarded as self-regulating, always tending to return to a state of equilibrium, albeit a changed one. In this way, Parsons explains social change as a dynamic and functionally necessary response to disturbances within the system. Although, for Parsons, social systems tend towards a state of equilibrium, a perfect equilibrium is never attained – instead, societies are thought to exist in a state of 'moving equilibrium'.

Social evolution A second aspect of Parsons' approach to social change is his notion of *social evolution*. Heavily influenced by such 19th century social evolutionists as Herbert Spencer, Parsons believed that all social systems are involved in an evolutionary development from more simple to more complex forms. The central concept used by Parsons to explain the patterns of social evolution is *structural differentiation*. This refers to the tendency of social institutions to become more specialised. Thus, for example, prior to the industrial revolution, the household used to be not only a domestic space, but also a place where goods were produced. After the industrial revolution, factories replaced the household as a site of production and the household came to fulfil the more specialised role as a site of domestic activity only.

This trend carries with it its own problems, however, which modern societies must solve. In particular, the development of increasingly specialised roles and institutions requires the development of an increasingly broad and general set of values capable of regulating a wider range of activities. In modern industrial societies, such values include a belief in *universalism* and in *achievement* – universal society-wide standards of achievement are applied to everyone and form the basis for allocating people to roles and fixing their rewards. Such general values are capable of regulating a very wide range of specialised activities in our societies.

Robert K. Merton

Parsons' work represents the height of functionalist theorising in sociology, and is the most systematic and

abstract of functionalist approaches. Parsons' desire to explain all aspects of all societies from within a single theoretical framework has led to his theory being described as a *grand* theory. One functionalist sociologist who attempted to refine functionalist analysis, but at the same time rejected the highly abstract approach developed by Parsons, was Robert K. Merton.

Merton's modification of functionalist theory begins with a critique of the notion – fundamental to Parsons' model – that societies exhibit 'functional unity'. This is the idea that all parts of a society are interconnected such that all parts of the system work together for the benefit of the whole, and that a change in one part of the system will necessarily produce change elsewhere. Merton suggests that whilst this may sometimes be the case, one cannot assume that it will be in advance. Rather, the degree to which parts of the social system are interconnected is a matter which should be empirically investigated in each case. Indeed, Merton suggests that in modern highly differentiated societies, a relatively high degree of *functional autonomy* will exist within parts of the social system. In other words, some parts will operate as largely independent units.

Merton also challenges the idea of 'universal functionalism', that is, the idea that all parts of the social system fulfil some positive function. Again, as with the issue of functional unity, Merton suggests that whether or not a particular part of the social system fulfils a positive function is a matter for investigation and is not something which can be assumed in advance. For Merton, any part of the system might be either functional, dysfunctional or non-functional. In other words, its contribution to the social system may be positive, negative or non-existent.

Finally, Merton challenges what he terms the 'postulate of indispensability' – the assumption that the institutions or roles which actually exist within a society are the only ones which could meet that society's functional prerequisites. In other words, he challenges the assumption made by many functionalists that social institutions and roles exist by necessity and are therefore inevitable parts of that society. Instead, Merton argues that the same functional needs could just as well be met by different institutions and roles which are functionally equivalent.

These specific criticisms of grand theory advanced by Merton led him to suggest that social theorists should abandon their search for over-arching theoretical systems which specify the nature and functions of social institutions in advance. Instead, they should concentrate upon developing more concrete theories grounded in empirical evidence, which address specific social phenomena rather than entire social systems. Such theories were called by Merton, *theories of the middle range*.

Evaluation

Teleology Despite Durkheim's early caution about confusing the cause of a phenomenon with its functions, this charge can be levelled at later functionalist theorists. In particular, functionalist theories may be accused of being *teleological*. A theory is said to be teleological if it explains a phenomenon's causes in terms of its effects. Thus if functionalists argue that the cause of social stratification is to allocate the most able individuals to the most important positions in society, then their argument is teleological – it explains causes in terms of effects. This can lead to some very strange explanations. For example, if it is argued that the family exists because it has the effect of stabilising adult personalities and of accomplishing the primary socialisation of children, then it seems difficult to avoid the assumption that this is because someone sat down and invented the family for this purpose. Of course this would be absurd. As we have seen, however, functionalist explanations tend to be of this type, and so can be criticised on the logical grounds that they confuse cause and effect.

Value consensus A second criticism which can be levelled at functionalist theory is that it over-emphasises the degree of *value consensus* – agreement about values – in societies. As Merton's critique of functionalism suggests, it can be argued that the degree of value consensus in a society is an empirical matter which cannot be presumed in advance. At the very least, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that the degree of value consensus which exists will undergo change over time, and will vary between different social groups. In addition, it has been suggested there is no reason to assume that even if a high degree of value consensus exists, it will necessarily promote social solidarity. Collective commitment to an ethic of individualism, for example, may produce exactly the opposite effect.

Conflict A third criticism of functionalism is that in its concentration on social order and value consensus, it largely ignores the existence of coercion and conflict in society. For example, David Lockwood has pointed out that Parsons' emphasis on social order and value consensus ignores the fact that competition for scarce resources, an inherent feature of modern societies, will inevitably lead to conflict over scarce resources.

key terms

Functional prerequisites Requirements which must be met and problems which must be solved in order for the social system to survive.
Adaptation The need for the social system to adapt to its environment.
Goal attainment The need for society to set goals for its members and institutions.
Integration The need to maintain order and stability in society, and to deal with deviance.
Pattern maintenance The need for value consensus and commitment to those values.
Structural differentiation The tendency for social institutions, such as the family and religion, to become more specialised in terms of their functions.
Functional autonomy The idea that some parts of society operate as largely independent units.
Teleology Explaining the causes of something in terms of its effects.

activity6 functions and dysfunctions

Item A

Street party in Jubilee Drive, Liverpool, to celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee

Item B

Anti-capitalist riot, London, 2000

Item C

Glastonbury music festival

Item D

Domestic violence

questions

1 From a functionalist view, which activities in Items A to D would be seen as functional and which as dysfunctional?

2 Explain your answers in terms of functionalist theory.

3.2 Marxism

Although Marxism has a long ancestry, it did not grow to prominence within sociology until the 1960s. That decade saw a range of social movements which challenged the dominant social order and made the functionalist picture of a social system based on value consensus seem less plausible. In this context, Marxism gained converts with its picture of society as inherently riven by social conflict.

Marxism, as a sociological perspective, does not slavishly follow Marx in every particular but rather accepts three of his central beliefs – a belief that in some sense the economy is of primary importance, that class conflict is consequently central, and that ultimately this will result in

a more desirable form of society. Where modern Marxists part company with Marx is over the question of whether it is possible to identify the conditions which will entail the demise of capitalism. Marx himself was somewhat vague on this issue, but a number of his followers adopted an economic determinist position whereby economic crises were seen as inevitably dooming capitalism to extinction.

The Marxists we shall be examining in this section reject this position. Impressed by the capacity of capitalism to survive crises, they pay particular attention to the role of the superstructure in maintaining it. We shall look at two very different versions of Marxism – *humanist Marxism* and *structuralist Marxism*. The first develops Marx's early work and adopts as its starting point the assumption that human beings are able to transform their environment. The second develops Marx's later work and adopts as its starting point the assumption that human beings are the product of structures.

Humanist Marxism

Gramsci Gramsci's central contribution to Marxism is his development of Marx's ideas on ideology through a theory of *hegemony* (1971). The bourgeoisie, he argues, seek to maintain their domination not only by using the state to coerce people but also, increasingly, by propagating ideologies, through the institutions of civil society such as the churches, in order to win people's consent. For the bourgeoisie to be ideologically dominant, or hegemonic, these ideologies need to be tied into the popular culture of the subordinate classes.

The extent to which such hegemony is achieved varies over time but it is unlikely ever to be complete. There are two reasons for this. First, the bourgeoisie are often divided and frequently need to forge alliances with other groups in order to constitute a *power bloc* and control the state. Second, the proletariat has a *dual consciousness*, one part of which reflects the ideas of the bourgeoisie and the other part of which reflects their everyday experience. The need to create a power bloc inhibits the propagation of a coherent ideology, while the existence of dual consciousness means that workers will at least partially see through bourgeois ideology.

For Gramsci a proletarian revolution will *not* inevitably result from economic crises. What is needed is for the proletariat to make alliances with other groups and for Marxists to win the hearts and minds of the subordinate classes by connecting Marxist ideas to popular culture. Gramsci is optimistic that in the struggle for hegemony, people will eventually be persuaded of the need for revolution. The stress Gramsci places on popular culture as the site in which ideologies compete has been taken up in cultural studies where youth subcultural styles are seen on the one hand as indicative of resistance to domination and on the other hand as an opportunity for marketing a new fashion, for general consumption and profit. (For further discussion of Gramsci, see page 76-77).

Critical theory What distinguishes critical theory is its attempt to identify what is distinctively human and to use this as a yardstick from which to criticise existing society. We shall look at two examples here – the Frankfurt School, and its three main figures, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, and the chief heir to that inheritance, Habermas.

The Frankfurt School For the Frankfurt School there are two attributes which distinguish human beings from animals – the ability, which Marx highlighted, to transform the environment, and the ability, which the Enlightenment stressed, to make rational decisions about our lives. Capitalist societies do not allow human beings to exercise their creativity and reason and thus deserve criticism for being oppressive and irrational. The Frankfurt School agrees with Gramsci that particular attention needs to be paid to ideology which is increasingly integrating people into the capitalist system. Two phenomena are highlighted as crucial here – the growth of *instrumental reason* which is seen as the dominant way of thinking in capitalist societies and the development of *mass culture*.

The stress on instrumental reason is reminiscent of Weber's emphasis on rationalisation as a central feature of modernity. It is a way of looking at the world which 'is concerned with discovering how to do things, not what should be done' (Craib, 1984). According to the Frankfurt School, the search for the most efficient means to achieve ends not only generates an uncritical attitude towards the ends pursued in capitalist societies, but also encourages us to treat people as means rather than ends in themselves. Reason does not, as the Enlightenment hoped, liberate people in capitalist societies but instead becomes a mechanism for oppressing people.

People's acceptance of instrumental reason is explained by the Frankfurt School in terms of the development of mass culture. Not only is culture now an industry, but developments in technology have meant that through various media such as newspapers it reaches the mass of the population. Adorno and Horkheimer use the term 'culture industry' to refer to the products and processes of mass culture. Such an industry does not meet people's true needs but instead produces and satisfies false needs. Our true need – to make collective rational choices about our lives – is denied and instead we are encouraged as individuals to choose which standardised products to consume. We are discouraged in the process from thinking beyond the confines of the moment. Art or high culture is different because it embodies ideals which cannot be met within capitalist societies and therefore provides us with a vision of an alternative society. This function of art, however, is increasingly lost as the culture industry turns it into another cultural commodity. While at one stage, the music of Mozart provided a vision of a harmonious world at odds with existing disorder, now it has become incorporated into mass culture. The culture industry claims that the world is already harmonious so that the critical function of art now only resides at the margins, in the work of those who challenge this supposed harmony, such as the music of Schoenberg.

Such an analysis leads the Frankfurt School to a very pessimistic conclusion. Hegemony in contemporary capitalist societies now seems almost complete. People are dominated not only at work but also in their leisure. What's more there seem to be few signs of resistance. Although Marcuse recognises that there are a few marginal groups such as ethnic minorities who are not fully integrated into the system, the overriding picture is of society as a mass of isolated individuals who are manipulated by big business. There seems to be no way out.

Habermas Habermas's starting point is different from that of the Frankfurt School. For Habermas, what distinguishes human beings is not only their ability to transform the environment but also language – the ability to use signs to communicate with each other. This has far reaching consequences. According to Habermas, when one person talks to another, that person implicitly claims that what is said is intelligible, true, justified and sincere. For there to be rational communication, speakers need to be able to defend all four claims. This presumes various conditions, ie that 'there are no external constraints preventing participants from assessing evidence and argument, and in which each participant has an equal and open chance of entering the discussion' (Giddens, 1985). Circumstances where these conditions are met Habermas calls an *ideal speech situation*. And it is this which provides him with a yardstick against which to measure existing social arrangements.

Social evolution has witnessed increasing possibilities for rational communication and at the same time the emergence of legally sanctioned institutions such as state bureaucracies and markets. In a complex society, it is not always possible for communication to settle competing claims. Instead, power and money become major mechanisms for routinely settling issues ranging from an individual's welfare entitlement to the price of bananas. A problem arises, however, when power and money 'penetrate into areas of everyday life and practice which require communicative action' (Layder, 1994). According to Habermas, this has happened with politics. Whereas politics should involve discussion and debate over what are desirable ends, increasingly it has become simply a question of who can run the economy best. In other words, communicative rationality has been displaced by instrumental rationality. Unlike the Frankfurt school, Habermas does see the glimmering of a way out, for he does not see capitalism as a stable system.

Habermas identifies four types of crisis through which the system moves. In early capitalism *economic crises* present the main problem. According to Habermas, the state reacts to economic crises by accepting an increasing level of responsibility for the management of the economy through such familiar strategies as the protection of home markets and promotion of public sector production. Such action, however, generates a *rationality crisis*. Government intervention in the economy requires heavy borrowing but this creates inflation and disrupts the normal working of the market. Government intervention ceases for a time but the shift between interventionist and laissez-faire (non-interventionist) approaches to the management of the economy makes the state appear to be acting in an irrational manner. This leads to a *legitimation crisis*. The state finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile the conflicting demands placed upon it. The switch from an interventionist to a laissez-faire approach means that people's expectations of improved welfare cannot be met. At this stage the state loses its legitimacy. This in turns leads to a *motivation crisis*. Increased state power, coupled with the seeming irrelevance of which political party forms the government, undermine people's motivation for participating in the system at all.

There is a way out, however. For new social movements may emerge, such as the environmentalist and women's movements, to challenge instrumental rationality and inject back into politics a concern with values. Although critical theory questions the link which Marx saw between the rise of the proletariat and the advent of a free society, its search for 'an emancipatory alternative to the existing order' indicates its continuing commitment to the Enlightenment ideal (Bronner & Kellner, 1989).

Structuralist Marxism

For structuralist Marxism, the notion that we are the authors of our actions is mistaken. Rather we are the products of underlying structures. Despite its opposition to humanistic Marxism on this issue, there is agreement that economic determinism needs to be rejected. This is clear(ish) in the work of Althusser.

According to Althusser, societies – which he labels social formations – comprise three levels: the economic, the political and the ideological. Although the economy is 'determinant in the last instance', the political and ideological levels are not mere reflections of the economy but have 'relative autonomy' – a degree of independence – and do have effects on the economy.

To clarify what this means, it is helpful to think of an analogy – a three storey building comprising a shop on the ground floor, offices on the second and living quarters on the third. It does not make sense to say 'that the first and second floors are caused by the ground floor, even though they rest upon it' (Craib, 1984). If we assume that the building is one enterprise, the office work which goes on on the first floor is obviously dependent upon the kind of trading conducted in the shop, but work relationships there may well develop in a quite different way. Similarly, if the owners live on the second floor their style of life is influenced by the nature of the business, but their family life has its own dynamics. The economy, in short, does set limits on the political and ideological levels but the latter are not completely dependent upon the former. What's more these levels affect the economy. Returning to our example, new information systems in the office may

increase turnover in the shop, while a family bust up might force the business to close down. The interaction, in short, between the three levels is extremely complex.

Althusser's rejection of economic determinism is further apparent when he argues that different types of society can be distinguished according to the dominance of the different levels. What he means by this is that in the operation of a society, one particular level may become more important than the others. It is, however, the economic level which determines which of the levels is dominant at any particular time. 'It is as if the economic level hands over its power to one of the other levels, or keeps it to itself, for the duration of that type of society' (Craib 1984). Two examples illustrate this. Under feudalism, the landlords have to ensure that serfs hand over the surplus which they have produced. To do this, they are reliant on the state forcing the serfs to do so, or the church persuading them to do so. In this mode of production, the political and ideological levels are thus dominant. Under capitalism, by contrast, the bourgeoisie automatically receive the surplus produced by the proletariat. In this mode of production, the economic level is dominant.

Although this is the case, Althusser recognises that capitalist relations of production depend upon a number of conditions being fulfilled which cannot be guaranteed purely at the economic level. Workers need, for example, to be trained in the appropriate skills and persuaded to accept their role. For Althusser (1971), it is above all the state which ensures that these conditions are met and that 'the reproduction of the relations of production' occurs. It does this in two ways – through 'repressive state apparatuses' such as the army and the police which coerce people and through 'ideological state apparatuses' such as education and the mass media which ensure that people are socialised to fill their allotted places in the relations of production. We may think that we are the authors of our own actions but, in fact, we are the products of pre-existing structures which map out our lives for us. Capitalism can be overthrown, but this will depend not upon people changing their consciousness, but rather upon contradictions at different levels coming together to reinforce each other. Althusser calls this process *overdetermination*. This is when capitalism is most vulnerable to revolution, as in the case of the Russian Revolution in 1917.

Evaluation

What is most striking when looking at Marxism are the different approaches within it. We need really to evaluate each separately. Nonetheless, there is some agreement that central to the analysis of modern society are the concepts of capitalism and class. The main concerns of Marxism are twofold: 1) to account for the unexpected stability of capitalism and 2) to identify the factors likely to lead to the demise of capitalism. While Marxists agree that the economy is in some sense fundamental and that class conflict is therefore central, in practice they often pay particular attention to the superstructure (the state and ideology) and acknowledge the importance of social movements not based on class.

They therefore often find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. If they attempt to do justice to the complexity of the world and question, for example, the link between the proletariat and the demise of capitalism, aren't they abandoning Marxism? If they attempt to do justice to the complexity of the world and see, for example, the economy as only determinant in the last instance, aren't they putting forward a theory which is 'unfalsifiable' and in Popper's view as unscientific as the belief that God is all powerful?

key terms

Humanist Marxism Assumes that human beings can transform their environment and influence social change.
Structuralist Marxism Assumes that human behaviour is largely shaped by the structure of society and that human beings are a product of structures.
Hegemony Domination through ideology.
Dual consciousness The view that proletarian consciousness is shaped by the dominant ideology and their everyday experience.
Instrumental reason The use of reason to discover the most efficient means to achieve ends.
Mass culture A culture based on false needs which is transmitted through the media to the mass of the population.
Overdetermination When contradictions at different levels of society – the economic, political and ideological – come together and reinforce each other.

activity7 a crisis of hegemony?

Item A The Handsworth 'mugging'

In March 1973, two boys were found guilty of robbing and inflicting grievous bodily harm on a man in Handsworth, Birmingham. The boys had stolen a total of 30p, some keys and five cigarettes. They had also returned to attack the victim two hours after the initial incident. Each boy received a ten year sentence. A third boy, the 'ringleader', according to the judge on the case, was found guilty of attempted murder and robbery with regard to the same victim. He was given a twenty year sentence. All three sentences were extremely long and, arguably, harsh for the type of crimes committed.

Item B Press headline 17 August 1972

As Crimes of Violence Escalate, a Word Common in The United States Enters the British Headlines: Mugging. To our Police, it's a frightening new strain of crime.
(Daily Mirror)

Item C Press editorial 13 October 1972

WHAT ARE the British people most concerned about today? Wages? Prices? Immigration? Pornography? People are talking about all these things. But the Sun believes there is another issue which has everyone deeply worried and angry: VIOLENCE IN OUR STREETS... Nothing could be more utterly against our way of life, based on a common sense regard for law and order ... If punitive jail sentences help to stop the violence – and nothing else has done – then they will not only prove to be the only way. They will, regrettably, be the RIGHT way. And the judges will have the backing of the public.

(Sun)

Item D A judge's view

Mugging is becoming more and more prevalent, certainly in London. As a result, decent citizens are afraid to use the Underground late at night, and indeed are afraid to use the underpasses for fear of mugging. We are told that in America people are even afraid to walk in the streets late at night for fear of mugging. This is an offence for which deterrent sentences should be passed.

Judge Alexander Karmel, QC

Item E A politician's view

In my view it is absolutely essential to stop this rising tide of mugging in our cities. I have seen what happens in America where muggings are rife. It is absolutely horrifying to know that in all the big American cities, coast to coast, there are areas where people dare not go out after dark. I am extremely anxious that such a situation should never come to Britain.

Birmingham MP, Mrs Jill Knight (quoted in the *Birmingham Evening Mail,* 20.8.1972)

Item F Social conflict – Northern Ireland, 1972

In 1972, the IRA stepped up its bombing campaign and tens of thousands of Catholics took part in civil rights marches. On 30 January 1972, soldiers opened fire on an illegal march in Derry killing 13 and injuring 29. On 22 February, seven people were killed in an IRA attack on the 16th Parachute Brigade at Aldershot. On 28 March, 100,000 Protestants marched against direct rule from Westminster.

The Bogside, Derry, 1972. Rioting Catholic youth flee from a gas cannister fired by British troops.

Item G Social conflict – the miners' strike, 1972

In 1972, striking miners attempted to create a power crisis. In February 1972 they clashed with police as they tried to prevent trucks taking coke from the West Midland Gas Board coke depot in Birmingham. At Longannet, near Edinburgh, 2,000 miners fought with police to prevent deliveries of oil to the power station. Most power stations were working well below capacity and 12 were completely shut down by fuel shortages. The government called a state of emergency.

Striking miners face 500 police at West Midlands Gas Board coke depot, 1972.

questions

1 Read Items A to E. What common themes appear in the reactions from the press, the judiciary and the politician?

2 Look at Items F and G. How might they indicate a crisis in hegemony?

3 Why did the state respond to this crisis by focusing attention on the seemingly trivial issue of 'mugging'?

3.3 Symbolic interactionism

Although, as we have seen, there are significant differences between functionalist and Marxist theories of society, both emphasise the ways in which individual behaviour and consciousness are shaped by external forces in society. In their own ways, therefore, both may be regarded to some extent as *deterministic* theories, in which little scope is allowed for individuals to shape their own destinies by the exercise of their free will. Symbolic interactionists, by contrast, emphasise the ways in which society is actively shaped by the conscious and deliberate actions of its members. For this reason, symbolic interactionism is usually regarded as a *social action theory*, whilst functionalism and Marxism are regarded as *structural* theories.

Although a wide range of intellectual influences on the development of symbolic interactionism may be traced – including especially the work of such 18th century Scottish Moralists as Adam Ferguson, John Millar and Adam Smith, and in the 19th century, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Perhaps the greatest influence was the late 19th century American philosophy of 'pragmatism' developed by such men as John Dewey, William James and Charles Pierce.

At the heart of pragmatism, as with symbolic interactionism, was a concern with 'meaning'. For pragmatists, the meaning of an object was not intrinsic to that object, but depended upon the ways in which human beings behaved towards it. So, for example, there is nothing about a chair which intrinsically gives it its significance as something we sit upon – this significance derives entirely from the fact that this is indeed how human beings behave towards chairs. It would be entirely possible for us to treat chairs as objects of worship, as places for our pet canaries to perch, or as virtually anything else. And if we were to do so, the meaning of 'chair' would be quite different, even though the physical nature of the object remains unchanged. It is this pragmatist concern with the ways in which human beings actively make their environments meaningful that forms the starting point of symbolic interactionism.

George Herbert Mead

One of the most significant figures in the development of the symbolic interactionist tradition was the American philosopher and social psychologist, George Herbert Mead. Mead taught at the University of Chicago from 1893 until his death in 1931, and founded what, because of its continued association with the university and the city, became known as the 'Chicago School' of symbolic interactionism. During his lifetime Mead published very little, most of his work being published after his death on the basis of lecture notes and fragmentary manuscripts. Probably his most significant book from the point of view of symbolic interactionism is *Mind, Self and Society*, first published in 1934.

Human conduct versus animal behaviour What is the difference between the behaviour of animals and that of human beings? Mead's answer to this question gives us the clue to the whole approach of symbolic interactionism. For Mead, following the ideas of behaviourists such as John B. Watson, animal behaviour could be accounted for in terms of responses to stimuli. Such responses may either be directly instinctual, such as a cat's response to a physical threat, or learned, as was demonstrated by Ivan Pavlov in his famous experiments where he 'conditioned' a dog to salivate whenever a bell was rung, by repeatedly associating the sound of the bell with the arrival of food. Whilst Mead agreed that such processes could account for certain aspects of human behaviour, he argued that most needed to be characterised in a qualitatively different way.

To see Mead's point, consider the following situation. If I walk up to a dog belonging to one of my students and deliver a hefty kick to its rear end, its behaviour will be predictable. It will probably bark, turn around and snap at my ankles. It would do the same whoever was to deliver the kick, and under whatever circumstances. Of course, following Pavlov's principle, it is possible that if I repeat this often enough, the dog will come to associate my presence with being kicked, and will begin to bark and snap at my ankles even when I do not kick it. But even so, its behaviour remains predictable. Now, imagine that instead of kicking the dog, I kick its owner, my student. How will the student respond? An initial response might be to say that he will kick me back, but a moment's reflection reveals that things are not so straightforward as at first they might seem. Will the student kick me back? He may, but this will depend upon how he has interpreted my kick. For example, he may interpret it as simply an act of gratuitous violence, in which case he would probably feel quite justified in returning the kick. However, there are a good many other ways in which my behaviour could be interpreted. He might judge that it was the result of mental instability on my part, in which case returning the kick begins to seem not merely inappropriate, but even callous – in our society, at least, assaulting the mentally ill is generally frowned upon. He might judge that my kick was merely an over-enthusiastic attempt to explain the principles of symbolic interactionism, in which case he might consider a verbal remonstration sufficient, as at least I had intended no harm.

The point is that how the student reacts will depend upon how he interprets my behaviour, or, in other words, what *meaning* he attributes to it. For Mead, this ability involves the distinctively human capacity to put oneself in the place of others, and to see oneself from the point of view of others. This he calls *role-taking*. In assessing how to respond to my kick, my student has to imagine the situation from my point of view – in short, he has to 'take my role'.

The self In an attempt to understand this distinctively human ability to take the role of others, Mead developed the concept of the *self*. For Mead, the self is viewed as having two elements which he terms the *I* and the *Me*. To

understand the distinction which Mead is making, consider the following example. Imagine that, in the course of a particularly dull lecture, you become aware of an impulse to leave the room and go for coffee. This impulse originates from the part of your personality which Mead calls the *I*. It is spontaneous and, as it were, uncensored.

However, although such impulses may be common enough, they are in fact rarely acted upon. This is because as soon as you become aware of such a desire, you cannot avoid imagining what sort of response your walking out of the lecture would provoke in those around you, and especially the lecturer! This 'imagining' of the likely responses of others originates from the part of the personality which Mead calls the *Me*. This is the internalised points of view of other people, and acts as a sort of censor of the *I's* plans.

Crucial to Mead's notion of the self, was the fact that it can only emerge as the result of social interaction. We have to learn the points of view of specific other people (*significant others* in Mead's terminology) and of society in general (for Mead, the *generalised other*). Mead identified two principal stages by which the child acquires a social self. The first he calls the *play stage*. This phase, which begins as soon as the child starts to use language, is exemplified by the tendency of young children to pretend to be someone else. For example, children will play 'doctors and nurses' or 'teachers', or pretend to be their father or mother chastising a younger sibling. Mead argues that, in doing this, children learn to see themselves from the point of view of significant others. The second stage is termed by Mead the *game stage*. This phase is exemplified by the playing of team games, in which the child has to see himself not only from the point of view of specific individuals, but of entire groups. For example, although the members of the opposing team in a game of football all have individual points of view, a player must be able to imagine himself from the collective point of view of that team, ie as their opponent. It is this process which, in Mead's view, completes the development of the social self because it leads to the ability to view oneself from the generalised point of view of one's society.

The significance of Mead's work Although Mead's work has important implications for both philosophy and social psychology, its importance to sociological theory lies principally in his view of human beings as socially self-conscious. They are not the mindless products of external social norms over which they have no control. Potentially, therefore, Mead's theory has the ability to explain how social order is maintained – by the fact that human beings possess an internalised representation of the point of view of their fellow members of society. At the same time, Mead also recognises that human beings act self-consciously in possibly unpredictable ways.

Herbert Blumer

After Mead's death in 1931, the tradition which he had helped to establish at the University of Chicago was continued by the sociologist Herbert Blumer. Indeed, although his work clearly owed an immense amount to Mead's influence, it was in fact Blumer who coined the term *symbolic interactionism*. Perhaps Blumer's greatest contribution to the development of symbolic interactionism was his working out of some of the major implications of symbolic interactionist theory for how sociologists should study society.

Blumer's critique of variable analysis As we have seen, a major assumption of a number of sociological approaches is that human behaviour can be understood in terms of the influences of external causes which are amenable to measurement. A classic example of this is Durkheim's study of suicide, in which a society's suicide rate is correlated with certain other features of that society, such as the degree of integration or regulation which prevails. Such explanations take the form, variable X (say a low level of integration) produces variable Y (say a high suicide rate). Individual consciousness as such is deliberately ignored in such explanations.

For Blumer, this was unacceptable. First of all, he emphasises the fact that variables are in fact creations of sociologists, and can usually only be identified and measured if the sociologist makes some quite arbitrary and groundless assumptions. Consider the example of social class. Imagine that a sociologist wishes to demonstrate a relationship between being working class and experiencing relatively poor health. Before this can even be meaningful, the sociologist must define and operationalise 'social class'. She may define social class in terms of occupation and classify her sample accordingly. Next she must define and operationalise the second variable, 'relatively poor health'. She may choose to use the incidence of longstanding illness. Finally, she must examine the relationship between the two variables – does being working class increase one's risk of experiencing poor health? The crucial point for Blumer, however, is that the answer to her question will depend almost entirely on how the variables have been defined and operationalised. They could, quite legitimately, have been defined and operationalised quite differently, and this would inevitably have produced a different answer to the question being addressed.

Second, and most importantly for Blumer, is the fact that even if social class does influence health, the process by which this occurs needs to be examined. Following Mead's theoretical lead, Blumer emphasises the fact that human behaviour does not result from the blind operation of external social forces (or, in other words, variables). Instead, behaviour (or *conduct*) results from how a social actor interprets or attributes meaning to a situation. Thus, to continue the same example, the central question would be, what meanings do people attach to their class position, and how do these meanings contribute to subsequent conduct which either promotes, or damages, their health? Crucial for Blumer, as for Mead, is the fact these meanings are not inevitable and pre-determined, but will change over time and vary between individuals.

Blumer therefore uses symbolic interactionist theory to challenge certain other sociological approaches on methodological grounds. In Blumer's view it is simply not legitimate to see human behaviour as resulting from the operation of measurable variables. Instead, individual actions need to be examined from the point of view of the actor's interpretation of the situation in which they find themself. It is for this reason that symbolic interactionists have tended to rely upon such qualitative research techniques as participant observation in an attempt to discover these meanings. (See page 137 for further discussion of Blumer's methodology.)

Erving Goffman – the dramaturgical analogy

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.

(*As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII, Shakespeare)

Impression management Erving Goffman (1959), the most influential symbolic interactionist, uses a *dramaturgical analogy* – society as drama – to illuminate social interaction and explore 'the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him'. Goffman argues that in everyday social interaction individuals are not only constantly expressing themselves to others, but also are trying to create certain impressions of themselves in the mind of an audience. This process of *impression management* is central to behaviour, as social actors attempt to control the impressions others have of them.

Goffman pays most attention to the non-verbal aspects of interpersonal communication and this is illustrated by the example he quotes from his research into rural life in the Shetland Islands. The crofter's wife, when serving local dishes to tourists, would check on the stated feelings of liking the food by watching how quickly the tourists ate the food and how eagerly it was consumed. In social interaction, we constantly watch for these non-verbal 'signs given off' as the ways in which a person's true feelings might be revealed. We do not always take things at face value, but we check the whole performance for any discrepancies, and for signs of the underlying motivations of the performer.

Performance The idea of performance is very important to Goffman's analysis. It refers to any activity of a participant in a social interaction which influences other participants. When playing a part, the individual is implicitly asking the others in an interaction to believe in their performance. And to achieve this, the social actor must create the appropriate impression. For example, some teachers take the view that it is important to get the upper hand in a new class – starting out tough and letting the students know who's boss. Any bumbling around or signs of weakness will not create the desired impression and the performance will fail, endangering future performances before that class. Goffman recognises that we can believe in the roles we play, or perform them with no real conviction. Deluding an audience may be out of self-interest, or it may be because the audience demands to be deluded. An illustration of the latter is the way doctors may give placebos (something which will have no medical effect) to hypochondriacal patients in the knowledge that there is nothing wrong with them, but simply because they demand treatment.

To be effective, performances need to be cohesive and sustained. Some of the techniques used to confirm an impression are considered next.

Front and regions Social actors employ the equivalent of theatrical 'props' to assist in the creation of a particular impression or definition of a situation. Anything which is intentionally or unintentionally used to enhance the effectiveness of a performance, Goffman refers to as 'front'. Furniture, decor and specialised equipment may be used to create the right setting for a performance and these are allied to the personal 'front' of clothing, speech, facial expressions and body language in order to create a cohesive impression, consistent with the role being expressed. The budding young executive, keen to create an impression of dynamism, will go in for 'power dressing' and is likely to develop the leisure interests and activities associated with that image. Many of the 'props' we carry or utilise have an apparently practical purpose, but their real value lies in the way they contribute to creating a desired impression. Solicitors' case papers are usually tied with ribbon, ostensibly to prevent the contents from falling out, but the social impact is one of setting aside legal papers from other kinds of material, inferring a special and superior status to them and to the person carrying them.

Just as a theatre has a 'frontstage' where the performance takes place, and a 'backstage' where actors can relax out of their roles, so there are separate 'regions' in social interactions. A 'region' is any area which is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception. Performances take place in a 'front region' whilst in the 'back region', a performance can be knowingly contradicted by out-of-role behaviour. In a school or college, the classroom, corridors, dining areas, etc form the 'front region' for adults performing the role of teacher and for younger people presenting the role of student. However, both teachers and students can relax from their respective roles in either the staff room, or in areas where teachers tend not to visit. Even in these 'back regions' however, a performance of a different kind has to be maintained as colleagues or friends now form a different audience to the 'frontstage' one. So the 'back region' for one performance becomes the 'front region' for another.

When performances fail Goffman notes that sometimes discrepancies appear in our performances which affect the audience's impressions of us. Sometimes an individual fails to maintain their expressive control, the mask slips and the whole performance can be jeopardised in the same way as a jarringly wrong note can spoil an entire concert.

Goffman suggests that examining occasions when this happens tells us a great deal about the nature of performances. For example, an audience, or part of an audience, sometimes colludes with a role player to cover up or ignore discrepancies in a performance and this illustrates the way social actors can work in 'teams', helping to maintain expressive control. Sometimes, however, discrepant behaviour can be more damaging to attempted impression management, culminating in embarrassment and even retirement from that role.

Role distance Goffman creates a strongly humanistic version of social role. The roles we perform in social interaction are not scripted for us by society, but are actively created and defined by our performances. Individuals often distance themselves from the role they are occupying by making communications out of character with the role, thus showing themselves to be more than the role being performed. Elements of the individual's self, made up from other roles they occupy, may appear in the performance of a role, and it is this which allows for spontaneity and creativity in a performance. In acting out the role of teacher for example, an individual may allow other roles – of parent, 'ordinary person' or friend – to enter their performance. Similarly, a civil servant, even when turning down a request because it doesn't fit the rules, may show a 'human face', to indicate that they are more than the role they are performing. We are not programmed into a role, straight-jacketing our behaviour, but through the use of 'role distance', actively create the roles we occupy.

Roles and power Analogies in sociology have to be used with care. It is one thing to point to apparent similarities between social behaviour and acting on a stage, and another to suggest that the two are identical. Goffman recognises the limitations of the dramaturgical analogy, pointing out that the stage presents activity which is imaginary and rehearsed, whilst social behaviour is real and frequently unplanned. Furthermore, in social life the audience often takes a very much more active role than it does in the theatre. For Goffman, therefore, the dramatic analogy is only a framework with which to begin to understand behaviour and many parts of his analysis, for example the idea of role distance, go much further.

Unlike some of the early symbolic interactionists, Goffman does pay specific attention to the ways in which inequalities in power are played out in face-to-face interaction. Without attempting to analyse the structural location and causes of inequality, Goffman nevertheless identifies the way hierarchies create problems of self-respect and opportunity. In *Asylums*, a study of the experience of inmates in a mental hospital, Goffman (1968) explores the problem posed for individual social actors by the imposition on them of a complete regime in a 'total institution' – an institution, such as a prison or mental hospital, in which inmates live, eat and sleep. Even in this, the most extreme case of apparent powerlessness, the individual is still capable of employing strategies which ensure that some self-determination can be retained. Inmates who fool the staff to get extra food or cigarettes are maintaining their sense of self-determination. In this respect, Goffman's work carries the important message that power is not merely the creation of a hierarchy of positions in society, but the constant acting out in face-to-face interaction of that inequality.

Whilst Goffman rejects the structural view that the individual is what their place in an organisation defines them to be, he does not, unlike some of the early symbolic interactionists, ignore the effect of external constraints. The individual's self does not arise solely out of their interaction with others, but within the context of the limitations imposed by social institutions. The self constantly moves between the limitations of external society and the needs of inner individuality. Goffman concludes that, 'it is against something that the self can emerge'. That 'something' is society. From this, it can be seen that Goffman is acknowledging the impact on our individuality of external social constraints. Our individual 'self' is created in the context of hierarchical organisations which, although they do not rigorously define the way we are, play a part in forging our individuality.

Evaluation

As noted above, symbolic interactionism has a number of strengths. First, it moves away from the deterministic assumptions of much sociological theory, and emphasises the conscious involvement of the actor in social life. Second, it recognises that human conduct is meaningful, and hence that a grasp of actors' meanings and interpretations is essential to an understanding of their actions.

Equally, however, symbolic interactionism can be criticised. The most fundamental and persistent difficulty is its tendency to ignore the influence of social structures. It is possible to acknowledge Blumer's criticisms of variable analysis whilst still recognising that an individual's

key terms

Role-taking Putting oneself in the place of others and seeing oneself from the point of view of others.
Self In Mead's view, the self consists of two elements, the *I* and the *Me*.
Significant others Specific other people who matter to the individual.
Generalised other Society in general.
Play stage The first stage in which a child acquires a social self. Involves seeing themselves from the point of view of significant others.
Game stage The second stage in this process, where they see themselves from the point of view of groups rather than just individuals.
Dramaturgical analogy Seeing a similarity between society and drama, and using this to illuminate social interaction.
Impression management The attempt by social actors to shape and control the impressions others have of them.
Performance Any activity of a participant in social interaction which influences other participants.
Role distance Distancing ourselves from the roles we are playing.

economic position (their class, however this is defined) will affect their behaviour whether they recognise it or not. Poverty, for example, would seem to be real enough, and its effects will be obvious whether or not an actor defines himself as poor. A second, and related, criticism is that symbolic interactionism exaggerates the extent to which human actors do in fact consciously interpret their environments. It may be argued that whilst self-conscious interpretation does occur, this tends to be only when some unusual situation is encountered. For most of the time, human beings seem to act as though on 'automatic pilot', or merely out of habit. The notion of habit seems closer to the view of action advanced by systems and structural theorists than to that advanced by symbolic interactionists.

summary

1. Functionalists argue that societies should be studied as systems – as wholes made up of interconnected parts.
3. The function of any part is the contribution it makes to society as a whole.
3. Talcott Parsons identifies four functional prerequisites which must be met if the social system is to survive – adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance.
4. Parsons explained social change in two ways.
   - As a response to disturbances in the system in order to restore it to equilibrium.
   - In terms of social evolution. As societies evolve, institutions become increasingly specialised – a process known as social differentiation.
5. Robert Merton questions the assumption that all parts of the social system are closely interconnected and work together for the benefit of the whole.
6. Merton argues that:
   - Some parts may have functional autonomy – they may operate as largely independent units.
   - Any part of society may be functional, non-functional or dysfunctional.
7. Criticisms of functionalism include the following.
   - Its theories are teleological – it tends to explain the causes of parts of society in terms of their effects or functions.
   - It overestimates the degree of value consensus in society.
   - Its focus on social order and value consensus downplays the importance of conflict in society.
8. There are two main versions of modern Marxism – humanist Marxism and structuralist Marxism.
9. Gramsci's humanist Marxism argues that the proletariat have a dual consciousness which means they will partially see through bourgeois ideology.
10. According to the Frankfurt School, instrumental reason and mass culture produce and satisfy false needs. Hegemony in capitalist societies is now almost complete.
11. Habermas sees capitalism as an unstable system which moves through a series of crises. He sees hope for the future in the emergence of new social movements which challenge instrumental rationality.
12. According to Althusser's structuralist Marxism, capitalism can be overthrown when contradictions at different levels of society – the economic, political and ideological – come together and reinforce each other.
13. The central concern for modern Marxism is to explain the unexpected stability of capitalism and to identify factors that will lead to its downfall.
14. Symbolic interactionism focuses on small-scale interaction situations and the meanings which direct action.
15. According to Mead, people react to others in terms of the meanings they give to the actions of others. This involves role-taking.
16. The self emerges from social interaction. The child acquires a social self as they pass through the play stage and the game stage.
17. Mead sees human beings as socially self-conscious – they do not simply behave in terms of social norms.
18. Blumer criticises variable analysis, arguing that it sees human beings as shaped by forces beyond their control. This ignores how social actors define and give meaning to their situation. And it fails to discover the meanings which direct action.
19. Goffman uses a dramaturgical analogy to interpret social action. Just like actors in a play, people in society are seen to create performances by the skilful use of impression management.
20. Social actors are seen as creative – negotiating the meanings which direct their actions and adapting and developing the roles they play.
21. Goffman accepts that there is an external society which can constrain human behaviour. However, there is still plenty of room for people to express their creativity and individuality.
22. Critics of symbolic interactionism argue that:
   - It largely ignores the influence of social structures on human behaviour.
   - It exaggerates the extent to which people consciously interpret their situation – often they act out of habit with little thought.

activity8 defining the situation

Henderson Dores is out with his girlfriend Irene Stein. They are trying to locate his car after spending the evening in a restaurant. It is central New York, just after midnight and Henderson has just noticed three men coming towards them. Irene is searching in her handbag for a tissue and has noticed nothing.

Henderson looked round again in what he hoped was an unconcerned natural way. The figures – dark, lithe-looking – had crossed to their side of the street with what looked like more urgency.

Jesus Christ, Henderson thought, they say it happens to everybody sooner or later – like a car crash or a burglary.

He felt a surging panic begin to overwhelm him. It's only when you haven't got any money that they kill you. Or pour petrol over you and set you alight. Or rape you. Gang-sodomise you. They were only ten yards away.

'RUN!' Henderson screamed, simultaneously flinging away the umbrella and giving Irene a mighty push. His hand closed around his wallet, fat with credit cards and dollars.

'You can have it, you bastards!' he yelled at the muggers and with all his strength bowled his wallet in their direction. He saw it fly open and notes and cards shower out, then he turned and ran.

Henderson races off, pursued by two of the men who eventually catch up with him.

'OK,' he bellowed in mingled rage and terror as he was hauled to a stop, 'Kill me, kill me, I don't care!'

Both his hands were firmly gripped. 'Sir,' a quiet voice came. 'Relax, please, sir. We have your wallet and your money here.'

Later, Henderson was able to reconstruct what happened. The three men were returning theatre-goers who had been surprised by Henderson suddenly throwing his girlfriend to the ground, throwing his wallet at them and running off in panic-stricken flight!

Adapted from Boyd, 1985

questions

1 Make a list of the ways in which meanings are transmitted in the situation described above.

2 How does this extract illustrate the view of one symbolic interactionist, W. I. Thomas, that 'if men define situations as real they are real in their consequences'?

Unit 4 Structure and action in sociology

keyissues

1 What are the main assumptions of structuralism, ethnomethodology and structuration theory?

2 How have they seen the relationship between structure and action?

Although functionalism, Marxism and symbolic interactionism have been central to the establishment of sociology as a discipline, alternative approaches have developed. In this unit, we shall look at three which present very different ways of looking at the relation between 'structure' and 'action'.

4.1 Structuralism

As the name implies, *structuralism* is concerned with structures. It has been an influential way of looking at the world, not only in sociology and the social sciences, but also in the arts, literary studies and history. The origins of structuralism lie in linguistics – the study of language – and in particular in the work of a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. In order to understand how structuralism has been of relevance as a sociological theory, it will be helpful to begin by considering the distinctive approach adopted by Saussure to the study of language.

Ferdinand de Saussure

Central to Saussure's analysis of language, and indeed to structuralism in general, is the observation that it is possible to study a language in two dimensions. First, we can study what individual people actually write and say. If a person utters a sentence like 'elephants are bigger than apples' we can pay attention to the meaning of this particular utterance, consider its truth, their reasons for saying it and so on. This dimension of language – the dimension of what people actually write and say – is called the *diachronic*. Contrasted with this, however, is the fact that it is only possible for anyone to utter this sentence, or indeed any other, because there are *rules* which go to make up the language which is being spoken. Most obviously, there are rules governing the relationship between words and things (or what Saussure calls *signifiers* and *signifieds*). In English, the word elephant (the signifier) is attached by convention to the large animals with trunks which are indigenous to Africa and India. Of course, there is no absolute reason why we should call them elephants (the word itself is quite arbitrary), but once the convention is established we must use it if we are to make sense.

Second, there are rules of grammar. In English, for example, there are particular rules governing tenses. So the sentence 'elephants were bigger than apples' has a different meaning from our original sentence, 'elephants are bigger than apples', by virtue of the grammatical rules governing past and present tenses. Saussure's point is that we can also study language in this way – as a system of rules governing what we can and cannot say. This second dimension, which concerns itself with the structure of language itself, is called the *synchronic*.

This distinction between the diachronic and the synchronic is fundamental not only to structuralist linguistics, but to the whole structuralist approach. To see how the distinction works, let us consider an example of human activity. Let us take lunch. When we have a meal, we are most likely to be concerned with its diachronic dimension – that is, what we are actually going to eat, and in what order. Imagine we go into a restaurant. Our order may well look something like this. We begin with soup of the day; we then move on to roast chicken, with potatoes, carrots and peas, and finally we choose strawberries and cream followed by coffee and mints. However, as with uttering individual sentences, this meal as it appears in the diachronic dimension depends upon rules which exist in the synchronic. First there are rules, often specific to cultures, about what we can and cannot eat. It is not generally permitted in our culture, for example, to eat parrots, whilst chickens are perfectly acceptable. Second, there are rules about what we can eat together from the same plate, and in what order – the grammatical rules of eating in fact. In our culture, for example, it is not really permissible to begin a meal with dessert and coffee, or to round it off with a bowl of soup. What is clear from this example, as with the example of language, is that the diachronic dimension – the element of action – depends upon the synchronic dimension – the element of structure. It is this concern with the synchronic, or structural elements of human activity, which is characteristic of structuralism.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

As you will by now have noticed, many of the sociological theorists considered in this chapter could be called structuralist. Certainly, Durkheim's concern with social facts, or Marx's emphasis on the underlying logic of capitalism, could win them the label of structuralist. However, the theorist who did most to formulate the implications of the structuralist approach for the social sciences was the Belgian anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss was concerned to apply structuralist methods to the analysis of human culture. One of his most famous analyses was of myths.

Myths exist in all societies. Although, superficially, the myths which different societies possess are quite different from each other, Lévi-Strauss's analysis emphasises that this is only so when considered in a diachronic sense. When viewed synchronically, he argues that myths possess certain common structural features. One can, according to Lévi-Strauss, and indeed he spends much time attempting to demonstrate this, place a large number of myths (theoretically all myths) alongside each other, and detect a common set of underlying rules which govern their structure. Lévi-Strauss attempts to explain this deep structure in terms of fundamental properties of the human mind. The underlying structure of culture, he says, is ultimately produced by the biologically determined structures of the human brain.

Oppositions Here is a brief illustration of Lévi-Strauss's approach. Myths are based on *oppositions.* Typical oppositions are good/evil; male/female; life/death; night/day; land/sea. For example, these and many other oppositions are found in the creation myth in *Genesis* which tells the story of the creation of the world, of life, and of human beings.

Many of these oppositions cause unwelcome contradictions for human beings. For example, death contradicts life. Myths can resolve this contradiction by stating that death is not a necessary consequence of life. They can introduce a new possibility, a new form of existence which is neither life nor death. Thus myths often contain 'mythical beings' such as angels, ghosts and other supernatural creatures who are neither alive nor dead as we normally understand these terms. In this way, myths mediate between the opposition of life and death, they resolve the contradiction.

Lévi-Strauss argues that all myths have the same basic structure – opposition and mediation or, put another way, contradiction and resolution. Only when this structure is revealed are we in a position to interpret the function of myths. In Lévi-Strauss's (1965) words, 'the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction'.

Semiotics

Derived from the theoretical basis of structuralism, *semiotics*, or the study of signs, was developed most famously in the work of Roland Barthes. Semiotic analysis concentrates upon the central structuralist principle that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, and hence determined only by convention and applied according to rules. For example, consider a red rose. A red rose can be considered a signifier, in the sense that it has a meaning beyond its mere physical existence as a flower. We know this from the fact that if a man gives a bunch of red roses to a woman, she will interpret this in a quite different way than if he had given her a bunch of daffodils. Red roses, in our culture, signify love, whilst daffodils do not. There is no necessary reason for this – it could just as easily be the other way round. The task of semiotics is to interpret the meanings of signs in our culture.

Barthes was also heavily influenced by Marxism, and one of his central tasks was to analyse the deep ideological meanings of signs in modern popular culture. He argued that very often such signs, whilst appearing on the surface

trivial enough, betray deeper ideological 'myths', which are often invisible to ordinary people and can only be seen when subjected to semiological analysis. One of Barthes' own examples will serve to illustrate this point. The example is of a Black soldier saluting the French flag on the cover of the magazine *Paris Match*. At face value, this is just what it appears to be – a Black soldier saluting the French flag. However, at a deeper level, Barthes argues, this picture signifies a strongly ideological message, namely, 'that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors' (Barthes, 1973). In other words, this seemingly straightforward picture of a Black soldier saluting the flag contains a hidden justification of French imperialism and a denial of racial discrimination.

As with other structuralist writers, Barthes' approach rests upon his analysis of the synchronic dimension, and specifically upon the systems of rules which govern the relationship between signifiers and that which they signify. It is only in relation to these systems of rules, which link certain signs with deeper ideological meanings, that the specific products (that is the diachronic dimension) of popular culture can be understood.

Evaluation

There can be no doubt that structuralism provides a powerful method for the analysis of virtually any aspect of human culture. More specifically, it has encouraged sociologists to recognise that 'what appears to us as solid, normal or natural, is in fact the end result of a process of production from some form of underlying structure' (Marshall, 1994). It has nevertheless been subject to criticisms.

One is that in reducing the diachronic to the synchronic – or, interpreting actual utterances, myths, pictures or whatever in terms of underlying systems of rules – we are in danger of losing the uniqueness and subtlety of actual human action. Subtle differences in meaning between myths, for example, are in danger of being lost sight of in the eagerness of the structuralist to find some underlying pattern which all myths have in common.

Second, it can be argued that structuralism has an inevitable difficulty in explaining change. If particular instances of action are to be explained with reference to some underlying structure, then it is difficult to see how changes in that structure are to be explained.

Despite these criticisms, as we shall see, the insights of structuralism have nevertheless been important in shaping modern sociological theory.

key terms

Diachronic The part of language people actually write and say.
Synchronic The structure of language – the rules governing language.
Oppositions Opposites such as good/evil, male/female.
Semiotics The study of signs.

4.2 Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology is an approach to sociological theorising developed during the 1960s by the American writer, Harold Garfinkel. Ethnomethodology can be seen largely as a reaction to the highly structural and systematic theorising in sociology which reached its climax with the work of Garfinkel's teacher, Talcott Parsons. The

activity9 semiotics

Item A

Item B

World War I poster

Item C

World War II poster

question

Interpret the ideological significance of Items A, B and C.

philosophical underpinnings of ethnomethodology lie in a branch of European philosophy known as phenomenology, and in particular in the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Alfred Schutz (1899-1959). Before we undertake an examination of ethnomethodology, therefore, it will be helpful to briefly consider the essence of phenomenology.

Phenomenology

The central point of phenomenology, first outlined by its founder Edmund Husserl, is that human beings do not experience the world at first hand, but rather interpret the world through their senses in a way which is meaningful to them. Imagine that you are looking at a table. How do you know that it is a table? At first sight, of course, that sounds like an absurd question, but a moment's thought reveals that it is in fact more profound than it seems. What you are in fact looking at is not intrinsically a table, but a solid object of a certain shape and size. You only call it a table because you know about tables – in other words, because you possess the category of table in your mind, and when you see objects of a certain shape and size, you place them into this category. Had you never encountered the concept of table you would not describe the object as a table – indeed to you, it would not be a table. It is this concern with how human actors make sense of the world around them that is at the centre of phenomenology.

This fundamental concern was applied specifically to the subject matter of sociology by Husserl's student, Alfred Schutz. Schutz emphasised the fact that the ways in which human beings classify objects in the world is not an individual process, but rather a collective process. The categories we use are not peculiar to ourselves, but are shared with other members of our society. Such categories are called by Schutz *typifications*.

Typification refers to any shared concept – golf ball, democracy, Church, armchair, etc – and forms the basis of communication. Collectively, Schutz says that our typifications build up into what he calls a stock of 'commonsense knowledge'. Of course, one consequence of this notion is that there is no guarantee that any two individuals will perceive the world in the same way, as there may always be differences in the typifications which they adopt as a result of different experiences of life. Yet Schutz argues that, in order for communication to be possible at all, we must assume that the typifications which we adopt are shared with others. We thus get by in the social world by creating and sustaining a sort of illusion of shared understanding.

Harold Garfinkel and ethnomethodology

An approximate meaning of the term 'ethnomethodology' is 'the methods used by people'. Specifically, it refers to the study of the methods which social actors (or 'members' as ethnomethodologists usually refer to them) use to make sense of their social world. It thus begins from the phenomenological assumption that the world does not present itself with an already meaningful and clearly demarcated order. Rather this order is actively constructed through the activities of members. Ethnomethodology seeks to understand how they do this.

The documentary method For Garfinkel, members employ the *documentary method* to make sense of and account for the social world which they inhabit. The documentary method involves taking certain aspects of a situation from an infinite number which could have been selected, defining them in a particular way, and then using this definition to provide evidence for some underlying pattern. New situations are then themselves interpreted in relation to this underlying pattern.

An example of this is Atkinson's study of the practices of coroners (see pages 137-139 and 269-270). The underlying pattern here was the coroner's commonsense view of what constituted a suicide, and on this basis individual deaths were deemed either to be or not to be suicides. However, the very act of classifying deaths itself gives further support to the belief in the existence of an underlying pattern. Identifying particular examples of the pattern and the belief in the existence of the pattern itself are therefore mutually reinforcing. This mutual reinforcement was termed by Garfinkel *reflexivity*, and he felt that this was an essential element of social life. Members constantly seek to explain events in terms of underlying patterns, and use these explanations to justify and reinforce their initial belief in the existence of the underlying patterns. There is no reason to believe, however, that these patterns refer in any direct way to some external social reality.

Indexicality A central part of Garfinkel's analysis was the observation that members make interpretations of situations on the basis of context. Two members, acting in precisely the same way, may be subject to quite different interpretations depending upon the contexts of their actions. For example, if the action concerned is telling an off-colour joke, then if it is performed by a comedian in a night club it is likely to elicit a different interpretation than if it is told by a nun in a convent. This is what Garfinkel meant by *indexicality* – the meaning of the action in each case is not derived from intrinsic features of the action, but rather from the social contexts in which it takes place.

Rules and social order Parsons and many other sociologists assumed that rules were simply learned in the process of socialisation and were capable of guiding conduct in most situations. Garfinkel emphasises that it is the assumption of the existence of rules, rather than rules themselves, which is responsible for the maintenance of social order. Garfinkel illustrates this with reference to a simple game. His point is that even in a simple game, where the rules are written down in an unambiguous fashion, it is easy to find what he calls 'monsters', or possibilities not covered by the rules. Here is his illustration of how easy it is to find such monsters in even the simplest of games.

> Say we are going to propose a game of ticktacktoe. Two persons play ticktacktoe. Any two persons? When, today? Tomorrow? Do we have to be in sight of each other? Can we play by mail? Can one player be dead? (cited in Heritage, 1984).

The point of this illustration is that we assume that our activities are guided by clearly understood rules. However, in reality this is not the case. The extent to which the maintenance of social order is based upon such fragile assumptions is illustrated in Garfinkel's so-called 'breaching experiments'. Here, he asked his students to go into familiar situations and behave in unexpected ways. For example, some went into a department store and started to haggle over the price of goods, whilst others went home to their families and behaved like lodgers. In each case, the behaviour could not be easily accounted for, and produced reactions such as confusion and anger. What these experiments illustrate is that social order is in fact very fragile and only maintained by the mutual assumptions of members.

Ethnomethodology and sociology

As well as being a radically different approach to understanding social order, ethnomethodology also offers a general critique of sociological theory. Garfinkel argued that 'man' is usually represented by sociology as a 'cultural dope' – that is someone who unthinkingly and compliantly acts out the norms of their society. In contrast, ethnomethodology regards the individual as a skilled member of society, who is constantly engaged in interpreting and giving meaning to situations, and maintaining a sense of social order. For Garfinkel, then, social order is not an objective pre-given determinant of human action, but rather is the active accomplishment of members.

Ethnomethodologists have argued that conventional sociology employs very similar procedures to members

living their everyday lives. Specifically, just as members employ the documentary method to identify and justify underlying patterns, so do professional sociologists. Social class is one example. Because sociologists assume that there is an underlying pattern of social class relationships, particular instances of behaviour – such as voting patterns, educational achievements and so on – are interpreted in the light of this underlying pattern. This interpretation, in turn, gives further support for the existence of the underlying pattern. For ethnomethodologists, however, this would just be another example of a mutually reinforcing fiction. The realities of sociologists, therefore, are seen as just as 'constructed' as those of any other members.

Evaluation

There can be no doubt that ethnomethodology constituted a radical critique of conventional sociology. Its emphasis upon interpretation and social order as the active accomplishment of members did indeed offer a new way of looking at social order. It can nevertheless be subjected to various criticisms.

First, Alvin Gouldner has accused ethnomethodology of being preoccupied with trivia. In concentrating upon the mundane elements of everyday life, it ignores the wider inequalities in power and wealth which prevail in modern societies. Even granting Garfinkel's emphasis on the active construction of social reality by members, he seems to ignore the ways in which different groups in society might find it easier than others to have their view of reality adopted by the majority.

Second, ethnomethodology's critique of mainstream sociology could very easily be directed back on itself. Surely, if all other actors – including sociologists – employ the documentary method, then why should ethnomethodologists themselves be exempt? If they are not, then ethnomethodology becomes just another self-reinforcing account of an ultimately unknowable social world.

key terms

Typification Any shared concept – for example, bacon, grass, liberalism, death.

Documentary method The method used by members of society to make sense of the world around them. It involves selecting certain aspects of a situation, then using them as evidence of an underlying pattern. New situations are then interpreted in terms of this pattern.

Reflexivity As used by Garfinkel, explaining events in terms of underlying patterns and using these explanations to justify the existence of those patterns.

Indexicality The meaning of an action is derived from the context in which it takes place.

activity 10 ethnomethodology

Item A An experiment in counselling

In 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. Students were told to summarise a personal problem, and then ask the counsellor a series of questions which could be answered either 'yes' or 'no'. The counsellor sat in an adjoining room, and communicated with the student by intercom. Unknown to the students, the 'counsellor' was not who they claimed to be, and the answers were randomly divided in a predetermined sequence between 'yes' and 'no'. Despite the fact that the answers were completely random, and indeed that some contradicted previous answers, the students felt that the advice received was helpful and sensible.

Adapted from Garfinkel, 1967.

Item B A streaker

questions

1 Read Item A. In what ways does this experiment demonstrate the documentary method?

2 Item B is a picture of a streaker. How does this statement illustrate Garfinkel's concept of indexicality?

4.3 The unification of structure and action

As we have seen in this chapter, sociological theories tend to come closer to one of two general approaches – one which emphasises social structure, and the other which emphasises social action. It would be wrong to say that any theory in sociology completely ignores either structure or action, but it would be fair to say that whilst Marxists, functionalists and structuralists tend to emphasise the role of social structures, Weber, symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists tend to emphasise the creative and interpretivist nature of social action. This tendency for sociological theories to emphasise one aspect at the expense of the other has led some writers on sociological theory to suggest that structure and action represent alternative ways of looking at society which cannot be brought together. In this section, we shall consider one influential approach to this problem, that of the British sociologist Anthony Giddens.

Anthony Giddens and the theory of structuration

The duality of structure At the centre of Giddens' concern to overcome the division between structural and action approaches within sociology is his concept of the *duality of structure*. In simple terms, action (or 'agency' as he usually calls it) and structure are just two ways of looking at the same thing. For Giddens, structures are produced by social action, and it is only through social action that they are maintained over time. However, at the same time, it is only by the existence of structures that actions are made possible. Let us take the example of speech and language to illustrate this.

Language can be regarded as a structure. It is a set of rules for communication which exists independently of any particular individual who uses it. It therefore exerts constraint over individual language users (like Durkheim's social facts) in that if I wish to say something, I am obliged to use certain words in a certain order – if I want to be understood, that is. However, language (the structure) only exists because people use it correctly when they speak and write – in other words, through action. Indeed, it is only because people speak and write according to the rules of their language, that the language continues to exist. This should not be taken to imply that languages are simply reproduced by the act of speaking and writing, however. Although this will usually be the case, it is quite possible for new words to be introduced, old ones to be forgotten, and even new grammatical rules to enter the language as a result of the ways in which people write and speak. Thus for Giddens, although structure clearly influences action, action may also independently influence structure.

Structure, rules and resources Giddens identifies two important elements of structure: *rules* and *resources*. Rules refer to the range of regulatory principles which influence action. They could refer to unwritten rules such as how one proposes marriage, or to laws regulating how one is to drive a motor car. The second element of structure for Giddens is *resources*. Giddens identifies both *allocative* and *authoritative* resources. Allocative resources refer broadly to what Marx identified as the 'forces of production', whilst authoritative resources refer to the distribution of social power. For Giddens, each of these elements of structure may be reproduced through the agency of social actors, but equally they may be transformed by social actors.

Agency and the reproduction of structures Although Giddens allows the possibility that structures can be transformed through agency, he also seeks to explain their reproduction. According to Giddens, much human action is 'mundane', and draws upon stocks of shared commonsense knowledge which is routinely applied with little conscious thought. Agents draw upon their knowledge of rules, and make use of available resources to accomplish their goals. Giddens, in fact, suggests that human beings have an innate desire for predictability in their social lives. He believes that we share a basic need for what he calls 'ontological security'– a confidence that the world is in fact as it appears to be. This tends to produce social stability and persistence rather than social change.

Reflexity Although Giddens does emphasise the degree to which structures are reproduced through human agency, he also allows the possibility that they may change. Drawing on the insights of writers such as Goffman, Giddens points out that actors do not merely react to external stimuli, but engage in the 'reflexive monitoring of action'. This means that they can reflect upon their own actions and their consequences, and have the ability to choose new courses of action. However, Giddens acknowledges that structures do not only change as a result of deliberate actions by actors, but can change as the result of the unintended consequences of actions. For example, the decision by sufficient numbers of actors to visit a particular holiday resort may produce major changes in the local economy which no one intended, but which nevertheless resulted from these actions.

Evaluation

There can be no doubt that Giddens' work represents a major attempt to solve an apparently intractable problem in sociological theory – the relationship between structure and agency. Whilst Giddens' theory of structuration does indeed appear to offer a way out of this theoretical cul-de-sac, his work has nevertheless been subjected to criticism.

Margaret Archer has criticised Giddens for failing to give sufficient attention to the extent to which structures themselves influence the degree to which they can be changed through agency. She emphasises the fact that actors cannot simply change the world as they wish, and that very often structures will constrain action and systematically frustrate the transformative efforts of actors.

On a different theme, Ian Craib has argued that Giddens' model of the personality is in fact rather confused, and

rests upon certain basic misunderstandings of psychoanalytic theory. Specifically, Craib suggests that the important notion of ontological security – an inborn desire for predictability – is based upon a 'fundamentally oversimplified notion of the individual' (Craib, 1992).

key terms

Duality of structure Action and structure are two ways of looking at the same thing. Structures are produced by action and action maintains structure.
Agency Giddens' term for social action.
Reflexivity As used by Giddens, the ability of human beings to monitor and reflect on their own actions, and to choose new courses of action.

summary

1. Structuralism is concerned with the structures which underlie behaviour.
2. Lévi-Strauss applied structuralism to the study of culture. He argued that all myths have the same basic structure – opposition and resolution.
3. Barthes applied structuralism to the study of signs – semiotics. He claimed that 'deep' ideological meanings lie beneath the relatively trivial surface appearance of signs.
4. Phenomenology is concerned with how human actors make sense of the world around them. It argues that actors use typications – shared concepts – to build up a stock of 'commonsense knowledge'.
5. Ethnomethodology argues that members of society actively construct meanings and impose them on the world. This gives a sense of meaningful order.
6. According to Garfinkel, people use the documentary method to make sense of the world. This involves creating underlying patterns of meaning and imposing them on events and situations in order to make sense of them.
7. The meaning of an action is derived from the context in which it takes place, not from the intrinsic or essential features of the action.
8. According to Garfinkel, social order is maintained because members of society assume that rules exist. It is this assumption, rather than the rules themselves, which creates social order. In reality, social order is very fragile.
9. Ethnomethodology has been criticised for ignoring inequalities of wealth and power in the wider society, and for not considering the possibility that the powerful may impose their meanings on others.
10. According to Giddens, structure and action are two ways of looking at the same thing. Structures are produced by social action, and it is only through social action that structures are maintained over time.
11. Human behaviour is not completely determined by structures. Human beings are reflexive – they can reflect on their own actions and choose new courses of action.
12. Giddens' theory of structuration offers a way out of the opposition between structural and social action approaches.
13. Critics argue that Giddens fails to recognise the power that structures have to shape and constrain action. Actors cannot simply change the world as they choose.

Unit 5 Challenges to sociological theory

key issues

1. What are the main assumptions of globalisation and postmodernism?
2. How do they challenge more traditional sociological theories?

New approaches are constantly emerging which challenge the conventional wisdom of sociologists. Feminism, for example, questioned the male bias of the discipline and opened up new areas for investigation (see pages 143-145). In this unit we shall look at two recent approaches which challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of many sociologists.

5.1 Globalisation

At various stages in this chapter we have talked about society and indeed, if pushed to define the subject matter of sociology, many sociologists would say 'modern society'. Society, in turn, is often visualised as a social system with distinct boundaries separating it from other social systems. And this 'society' is usually equated with the nation-state. This is not surprising. For it reflects the nineteenth century origins of sociology when 'nation-states become supreme because they won at war, were economically successful and, subsequently, achieved a significant degree of legitimacy in the eyes of their populations and other states' (Held, 1992).

Beyond the nation-state There are two problems with picturing the subject matter of sociology in this way. First,

human behaviour has never been explicable purely in terms of particular societies or nation-states. The influence of major religions, patterns of trade and indeed war and conquest extend well beyond the boundaries of nation-states.

Second, we live in a 'shrinking' world. In this context, human behaviour is increasingly influenced by global forces. While *globalisation*, in the sense of the growing interconnectedness of societies, has always been a feature of modernity, a number of theorists have suggested that in the last two decades we have entered a qualitatively new phase of globalisation. One of its main features has been described as 'time-space compression', in recognition of the fact that our lives are increasingly, and remarkably quickly, influenced by distant events. David Harvey puts it well: 'As space appears to shrink to a "global" village of telecommunications and a "spaceship earth" of economic and ecological interdependencies – to use just two familiar and everyday images – and as time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is, so we have to learn to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spatial and temporal words' (Harvey, 1989).

Let us take each of these images of globalisation in turn. The Live Aid movement of the mid-1980s provides a good example of the way the world 'has come to seem like a village' (Tester, 1995). The movement, founded by the singer Bob Geldof, emerged in order to raise money to relieve an appalling famine in Ethiopia. It culminated in a day long concert, held at venues in Britain and America 3,000 miles apart but linked by satellite into one programme. The mass media was central. For it was television which allowed people in Britain and America to become aware in their living rooms of a famine miles away, and it was television which broadcast the concert around the world.

A dramatic illustration of our ecological interdependence on 'spaceship earth' was the explosion in 1986 at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in the former Soviet Republic of Ukraine. The consequences were not foreseeable but were felt as far away as Cumbria. The explosion provides an example of the way globalisation is producing what Ulrich Beck (1992) calls a 'risk society', in which the survival of the planet is threatened by technological developments. While natural hazards such as floods, hurricanes and volcanoes threatened people in the past, the risk environment which now confronts us 'is structured mainly by humanly created risks' (Giddens, 1990).

Opposing tendencies While there is widespread agreement that we are in a period of increasing globalisation, there is no agreement about what has brought it about, or what it will lead to. Indeed some aspects of globalisation appear contradictory.

In Giddens' (1990) words, globalisation does not bring about 'a generalised set of changes acting in a uniform direction, but consists of mutually opposed tendencies'. Here are some examples of these opposed tendencies.

- **First, cultural homogenisation versus differentiation.** Globalisation encourages cultural homogenisation – a uniform global culture. We can now drink Coca Cola at McDonald's, wear trainers and watch Hollywood films on television across the world. At the same time, there is a fascination with difference so that ethnic food, dress and music are also available around the world.
- **Second, old identities versus new identities.** Globalisation makes us increasingly aware of cultural differences. For some, this may be experienced as a threat to the familiar certainties of the past. Racism and religious fundamentalism are examples. They can be seen as defensive reactions which attempt to preserve or recreate a perceived past. For others, however, an awareness of other cultures may be interpreted as an opportunity to construct new identities which fuse different cultural traditions.
- **Third, centralisation versus decentralisation.** Globalisation enables organisations to develop which transcend national boundaries. Transnational corporations and the European Union are examples. At the same time, it generates a powerful decentralising force as communities seek to control their own fate. Hence the resurgence of nationalism in Eastern Europe with the break up of the Soviet Union.

The effects of globalisation are not only complex but there is also an unevenness with which globalisation has been experienced across space and time. It has quickened recently, but its consequences are not uniform across the globe. 'In the latest form of globalisation, it is still the images, artifacts and identities of Western modernity, produced by the cultural industries of "Western" societies (including Japan) which dominate the global networks' (Hall, 1992).

Evaluation The concept of globalisation does capture an important phenomenon and it does challenge the idea of society as a well-bounded system. While this means that we need to be highly sceptical of sociological theories which visualise societies as discrete social systems, it does not mean that we should abandon the idea of society. For societies can still exist within the framework of a global society. They are still recognised as societies by their members. And their boundaries are sufficiently clear for sociologists to recognise and study them as social units. (For further discussion and examples of globalisation see pages 92-94).

key terms

Globalisation The process by which societies become increasingly interconnected.
Cultural homogenisation The process by which cultures become increasingly similar.
Cultural differentiation The process by which aspects of one culture enter another.

activity11 globalisation

Item A Global products and global icons

Jakarta, Indonesia

Vietnamese edition of 8 Mile

David Beckham escorted through a cheering crowd in China. It is estimated that a billion Chinese watched his debut for Real Madrid against the all-star Chinese Dragons in Beijing on August 3, 2003.

Russian edition of Lord of the Rings

Item B Global risks – the world's fish

Last month a fleet's annual quota of fish was caught in eight minutes. The sea cannot stand it.

The world's fisheries are hurtling towards commercial extinction as hi-tech supertrawlers become ever more efficient at hoovering up their prey. The oceans, covering 70% of the globe, should – and could – adequately meet the needs of humanity without unbalancing the marine ecosystem. But greed, rather than commonsense or conservation, is driving exploitation of the seas.

Last month, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) warned 9 of the world's 17 major fishing grounds had been devastated by over-fishing, with four more under serious threat. The global fish catch, which rose five-fold between 1950 and 1989, has now levelled out at around 100 million tonnes a year.

Nobody knows for sure what effect chronic over-fishing will have on other marine wildlife. Just as worrying is the effect on the human beings who rely on fish to stay alive. But, for the developing world, the disappearance of commercial fisheries would spell disaster. In Asia alone, a billion people rely on fish as their main source of animal protein. And apart from the spectre of starvation, a fishing crash would cost an enormous number of jobs.

Danish industrial fishing vessel, North Sea

Adapted from the *Observer*, 2.4.1995

Item C Global risks – Chernobyl

In 1986, the nucular power station at Chernobyl in the Ukraine exploded. It provided a stark lesson about the huge sum which a single major nuclear accident can cost the world.

Nine years after the radioactive cloud released from Chernobyl passed over Wales, long-suffering farmers 1,500 miles from the scene of the accident still face controls on their sheep flocks.

In the Ukraine and Belarus, which took the brunt of the radiation, 1.3million hectares of land is contaminated, and estimates put the final clean-up bill at between £1.25 billion and £3.75 billion.

This figure includes resettlement of 2.5 million refugees living on contaminated land, medical treatment for victims, and the clean-up of the plant and surrounding irradiated countryside.

The trouble is that no matter how we generate energy, we create problems. The burning of coal, gas and oil plays havoc with our atmosphere, just as surely as the abuse of nuclear power devastates the ground.

It is an issue that transcends national borders. Global economic growth needs global energy planning. We do not have that, and there are precious few signs we will ever get it. The human mind seems almost incapable of dealing with the time scales and geography which are required when dealing with nuclear power. Yet we must face up to the issues. The alternative is short-term manoeuvring, and long term disaster.

Adapted from the *Observer*, 30.4.1995

Radiation check, Chernobyl

questions

1 How do the pictures in Item A illustrate globalisation?

2 How do Items B and C suggest that we live in a global 'risk society'?

3 Globalisation requires institutions for global government. Discuss with reference to Items B and C.

5.2 Postmodernism

Postmodernism as theory

Postmodernism is a new way of looking at the world. It questions all the key ideas of the Enlightenment. It rejects the view that it is possible to build either a natural or social science on the basis of observable facts. It argues that there is no objective or indisputable way of distinguishing truth from falsity. It sees no firm foundation for knowledge. And it rejects the Enlightenment belief that human beings are capable of achieving a rational understanding of social reality and can use this understanding to create a more rational and just society.

As such, postmodernism is a direct challenge to sociology.

Postmodernity and postmodern society

Postmodernists believe that we are now living in a new era – postmodernity – and a new form of society – postmodern society. This represents a clear break from the previous era – modernity – and the previous form of society – modern society.

Before examining postmodernist theory in more detail, here is a short sketch of how postmodernists see postmodern society.

A diversity of images and values Postmodern society is dominated by new information and communication technologies which bring the world into our homes and into our consciousness. Websites, e-mails, chat rooms, computer games, DVDs, CDs, and terrestrial, satellite and cable TV bombard us with sounds, symbols and images from across the globe. They expose us to an increasingly diverse range of ideas and values, many of which have little connection with our present or past lives. This can cut us off from our past, make our present seem rootless and unstable, and our future unpredictable.

This myriad of diverse images and values is constantly changing. New lifestyles come and go, new styles of music and fashion and new types of food and drink are regularly appearing. Everything appears fluid – nothing seems permanent and solid. The mainstream culture of modern society is replaced by the fleeting, unstable, fragmented culture of postmodern society.

Postmodern identities In modern societies, people's identities were usually drawn from their class, gender, occupation and ethnic group. In postmodern society, people have more opportunity to construct their own identities and more options to choose from. For example, a woman can be heterosexual, bisexual or lesbian, a business executive and a mother, she can be British, a Sikh

and a member of Greenpeace. And her lifestyle and consumption patterns can reflect her chosen identity. Brand-name goods such as Gucci and Dolce & Gabbana can be used as statements of her identity.

With all the choices on offer, it is fairly easy for people to change their identities, or to have several identities which they put on and take off depending on their social situation. As a result, postmodern identities are more unstable and fragile. They offer choice, but they don't always provide a firm and lasting foundation.

Loss of faith Exposure to increasingly diverse beliefs, values and lifestyles can lead to a relativist point of view. Nothing is right or wrong, everything is relative. A single truth is replaced by many truths and there is no objective way of choosing between them. Certainty is replaced with uncertainty and there is a loss of faith in rational thinking.

As a result, people are increasingly turning to a range of alternatives in their search for answers and solutions to problems – New Age religions, traditional healers and alternative therapists.

Postmodernity has seen a loss of faith in science and technology. The threat of weapons of mass destruction, the negative side-effects of drugs used to treat physical and psychological problems, global warming and the destruction of the environment caused by pollution, all point to science and technology gone wrong.

Views of reality Some postmodernists claim that our view of reality is largely shaped by the flood of images from the media. These images become as, if not more, real and significant than the things we directly experience in everyday life. For example, the death of Princess Diana resulted in an outpouring of grief across the world – but, for the vast majority, she existed only through the media. The 'unreal' becomes 'real' when a death, a divorce, or a marriage in a soap opera glues millions to the screen and forms a topic of conversation the following day. And, as its name suggests, reality TV brings 'real' people into everybody's homes and lives.

Evaluation Many of these observations of postmodern society are accepted, to a degree, by mainstream sociologists. However, they usually see them as aspects of late modernity rather than postmodernity.

Many sociologists are critical of the picture of society presented by postmodernists. For example, Greg Philo and David Miller (2001) make the following points.

- The claim that people are no longer able to make judgements of right and wrong about different views of the world and different ideologies is incorrect. The vast majority of people would still condemn the fascist ideology of Nazi Germany and the slaughter of millions of Jews, gypsies and gays in Nazi death camps.
- People are well aware that there is a reality beyond the images broadcast by the media. They recognise that media messages are often one-sided, partial and distorted.
- Many people are not free to construct their own identities, choose their own consumption patterns and select their own lifestyles. For example, people living in poverty simply don't have the money to buy Gucci sunglasses or Jean Paul Gaultier fragrance.

Having briefly outlined and assessed the postmodernist view of contemporary society, we now turn to the work of two of the most influential postmodernist writers – Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

Lyotard – a crisis in knowledge

Knowledge in the modern era meant science. Philosophers were, however, unable to agree upon the foundations for such knowledge. Science therefore needed to be justified in terms of a grand story or *metanarrative*. For the Enlightenment, science was justified on the grounds that it would lead to human emancipation and freedom. In view of the contribution of science in creating, for example, weapons of indiscriminate mass destruction, people are now sceptical towards this metanarrative and the status of science has consequently been questioned. And what is true of this metanarrative is true of others. None can be 'objectively' proved or rejected and so we need to be sceptical towards all metanarratives. Hence Lyotard defines the condition of postmodernity as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1992).

This is not to say that knowledge is unimportant. We live in a post-industrial society where, in fact, it is central. Knowledge has, however, fragmented into a series of 'language games' where the rules governing what counts as knowledge differ. The central concern is 'performativity', whether the information produced is efficient and saleable rather than of intrinsic value or serving some human purpose.

Lyotard welcomes the downfall of metanarratives and the emergence of a plurality of language games. Grand stories, with their privileged truth, rode roughshod over many groups and, in the case of Marxism, led to totalitarianism. In the postmodern era, there is a chance to hear the voices of diverse groups previously on the margins, such as women and ethnic minorities.

Baudrillard – a crisis in representation

Baudrillard agrees with Lyotard that we now live in a post-industrial society. His emphasis, however, is different and centres on the production and consumption of signs. Baudrillard's view is that although at one stage signs were a 'reflection of a basic reality' they now often 'bear no relation to any reality whatsoever' (Poster, 1988). Such signs are known as *simulations* and are characteristic of the images we see on our television screens, when stories and items that have no meaningful or logical connection to each other are juxtaposed.

Baudrillard argues that news reporting often involves simulation. For example, business fraud is reported as shocking and scandalous to conceal the fact that is widespread. Sometimes simulations can be experienced as

more real than reality. This is the 'hyperreal' where, for example, people write to characters in soap operas. John Storey gives a good example : 'The riots, following the acquittal of the four Los Angeles police officers captured on video physically assaulting the black motorist Rodney King, were headlined in two British newspapers as "LA Lawless", and in another as "LA War"; the story anchored not by historical reference to similar disturbances in Watts Los Angeles in 1965, or to the implications of the words – "No justice, no peace" – chanted by demonstrators during the riots. The editors chose instead to locate the story within the fictional world of the American television series *LA Law*. Baudrillard calls this "The dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV" '(Storey, 1993).

Baudrillard is in two minds about his response to this situation where image and reality can no longer be distinguished. At times, he suggests that we live in a society where we are able to construct our own identities in the process of consumption. Clothes and other items of consumption are not only material objects but also are signs which have meaning. By picking and mixing appropriate images we can distinguish ourselves from others. At other times, he suggests the best we can do is to enjoy the meaningless spectacle produced for us and delight in the sensuous pleasure which images can offer us.

Postmodern theory and social change

The work of Lyotard, Baudrillard and other postmodern theorists has been stimulating in raising new questions about social change. Are we witnessing a shift to a new postmodern culture? Have Lyotard and Baudrillard correctly identified the central features of this new culture? Is it true that people increasingly find general theories implausible and are sceptical towards the old political philosophies of liberalism, socialism and social democracy? Do we live in an era where media images are so pervasive that we find it increasingly difficult to distinguish what is real? Does the advent of a postmodern culture signify a shift towards a new social condition of postmodernity? Is it true that we now live in a post-industrial society? Is this a society which allows an increasing diversity of lifestyles to flourish? Is it one where we have much greater freedom to construct our own individual and collective identities, or one which witnesses an increasing fragmentation of our identities? These questions, which were initially raised by postmodern theorists, are central to much contemporary sociology and have stimulated other theorists, including Marxists such as Jameson and Harvey, to develop their theories in order to account for the fact that we are clearly living through an era of massive social change (Thompson, 1992).

Postmodernism and the Enlightenment

The challenge which postmodernism poses for sociological theory results from its rejection of the Enlightenment 'project' – the promise, which underpinned the emergence of sociology, that human beings could use their reason to produce knowledge of the social world and on that basis promote human progress. Postmodernists have put three central arguments forward.

Anti-foundationalism The first argument is known as *anti-foundationalism*. The search by philosophers for indisputable foundations to knowledge has been a failure. There are no general criteria which enable us to distinguish truth and falsity. We therefore have to accept that different communities will use different criteria to distinguish truth and falsity. What's more these communities will look at the world differently. For we are the subjects of language and other sign systems and can't step outside them to discover what things really mean. In short, there is absolutely nothing to guarantee what is true or what things mean.

Anti-totalisation The second argument is known as anti-totalisation. In view of the fact that there are no indisputable foundations to knowledge or firm bases to meaning, it is extremely arrogant of us to put forward general theories which pretend to reveal *the* truth or *the* meaning of things. We need to abandon attempts to produce theories which seek to depict the structure and dynamics of society as a whole and tolerate the coexistence of a diversity of more limited theories.

Anti-utopianism The third argument is known as *anti-utopianism*. In practice, knowledge has not produced the utopia of human freedom and emancipation, but has been used by some to impose one truth and one meaning on others. Knowledge has not so much provided us with the power to do things that we could not otherwise do, as allowed some groups to exert power over others.

These arguments cannot be dismissed lightly. First, we cannot attain certainty over questions of truth and meaning. Second, general theories which claim to reveal the inevitable development of society are flawed. There is no justification for believing that history has a purpose, or that we can predict the future. Third, knowledge has often been used by Western societies to dominate others. (For an outline of postmodernist methodology, see pages 140-141.)

Evaluation

The Enlightenment project, and with it the possibility of sociological theory, cannot be so easily dismissed.

- First, the fact that there are no indispensable foundations to knowledge and meaning does not mean that there are no general criteria of truth and that there is not a connection between sign systems and the world. To assume otherwise is to fall into the trap of relativism. Presumably, the postmodern theorists believe that what they say is meaningful and true or otherwise they would not bother to write books.
- Second, the fact that different societies have different ideas and beliefs of what is true and what things mean does not mean that we should abandon the search for general theories which seek to explain these differences. Indeed, somewhat inconsistently, postmodern theorists do provide such general theories.

- Third, the fact that reason has been used to dominate people does not mean that it did not play a progressive role in the past in combating 'the relative blinkeredness and backwardness of the epoch of pre-modernity' (McClennan, 1992), and that we should abandon the Enlightenment ideal that knowledge might further human emancipation. The arguments of postmodernist theories which challenge the very possibility of sociological theory are unconvincing.

key terms

Metanarrative A grand story or theory which explains and justifies something – for example, scientific theories, political ideologies and religions are seen by postmodernists as metanarratives.

Simulations Signs and images which have no relationship to reality.

Anti-foundationalism The argument that there are no clear, indisputable foundations to knowledge.

Anti-totalisation The argument that there are no general theories which reveal and explain the truth or the meaning of things.

Anti-utopianism The argument that knowledge has not been used to create a utopia – a perfect society. Instead, it has been used by some to exert power over others.

summary

1. Traditionally, the main unit for study in sociology has been the society – a social system with distinct boundaries which separates it from other social systems.
2. Globalisation challenges this view. Societies are becoming increasingly interconnected and cultures increasingly similar.
3. Some sociologists see opposing tendencies in the process of globalisation. They include:
   - Cultural homogenisation versus cultural differentiation
   - Old identities versus new identities
   - Centralisation versus decentralisation.
4. While recognising the impact of globalisation, sociologists have not abandoned the idea of society. The boundaries of societies are sufficiently distinct for them to be studied as social units.
5. Postmodernism rejects the key ideas of the Enlightenment – in particular, the view that it is possible to build a natural or social science on the basis of observable facts.
6. According to postmodernists, postmodern society has the following characteristics.
   - A diversity of images, values and lifestyles
   - Opportunities for people to construct their own identities
   - A loss of faith in rational thinking and in science and technology
   - Views of reality which are largely shaped by the media.
7. Lyotard argues that postmodern society is characterised by the downfall of metanarratives. Knowledge is judged in terms of performativity – whether it is efficient and saleable.
8. Baudrillard argues that members of postmodern society see the world in terms of simulations – images which bear no relation to reality.
9. Postmodernists reject Enlightenment ideas on the basis of three main arguments.
   - Anti-foundationalism
   - Anti-totalisation
   - Anti-utopianism.
10. Criticisms of postmodernism include the following.
    - To claim that there are no foundations to knowledge leads to relativism. In terms of their own argument, postmodernists' views are no better than anybody else's.
    - Just because different societies have different versions of the truth does not mean that their beliefs cannot be studied and explained.
    - Just because rational thinking has been used to dominate people does not mean it cannot be used to free them.

activity 12 postmodern society

Item A Detached identities

The more social life is influenced by the global marketing of styles, places and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems, the more identities become detached – disembedded – from specific times, places, histories and traditions, and appear 'free-floating'. We are confronted by a range of different identities, each appealing to us, or rather to different parts of ourselves, from which it seems possible to choose. It is the spread of consumerism, whether as reality or dream, which has contributed to this 'cultural supermarket' effect.

Adapted from Hall, 1992

Item B I am me

Salima Dhalla: I don't know how to start to describe myself. I feel identity-less but very unique. On paper I'm 'Asian' but in my head I'm a cocky little person with lots of hopes and ambitions.

My parents are East African, their parents are Indian, I was born in Wales. I went to a White middle-class girls' private school and I have brown skin, short Western hair, Western clothes, Eastern name, Western friends. So I guess I'm in an identity wasteland. Now I will only agree to being *me.*

Adapted from Kassam, 1997

Item C A shrinking world

Item D Norman and Norma

Norman on Tuesdays

Norma on Wednesdays

Norman Horton enjoyed his new hobby of line dancing so much that he decided to go twice a week – once as a man and once as a woman. Mr Horton, aged 58, would set off on Tuesday nights in open-neck shirt, trousers and stetson. But on Wednesdays he transformed himself into Norma, with a frilly blouse, short skirt, gold tights and high heels. A former paratrooper and military policeman, he has been cross-dressing since the age of 12. 'My wife doesn't mind me cross-dressing as long as I don't do it too often and keep it under control.'

Adapted from *The Guardian*,17.4.1998

Item E Bodybuilders

The top three in the women's bodybuilding world championship, 2002

Item F Panjabi MC

Panjabi MC. His music is a fusion of bhangra and hip hop.

Item G Growing up in poverty

questions

1 What does Stuart Hall in Item A mean by 'detached identities'?

2 What support do Items B to F provide for the view of postmodern society given by Stuart Hall in Item A and described in the preceding text?

3 What criticism of this view of postmodern society is suggested by Item G?