Structure/Agency

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The contents of this chapter are, in many senses, foundational to a lot of the arguments that follow within this book, as are many of the authors referred to.

Of all the concepts which sociology has developed to understand and investigate society, social structure is the most important and absolutely central to the discipline. The reason is simple. In order to conceive of society at all as a phenomenon which does exist objectively as a reality it is necessary to see that there is some definite form of organization to the way in which the persons who live in it relate to one another that shapes the nature of these relationships in particular ways. Society is these various patterns of social relationships that emerge and develop between its members, and social structure is the term (i.e. concept) that sociology uses to capture and describe the organization of these patterns and the shapes which they take.

It is not possible for sociology to think of society as simply an aggregate or collection of individuals *per se* because society consists of the ways in which they are collected together into a community of people. But it is at this point that the nature of what comprises social structure comes to constitute a problem for sociology and the issue of structure versus agency emerges as a central topic for the investigation of social life. Is the community which is society a collection of individuals who, as individuals, actively forge their relationships with one another and create society in the process of doing so? Or do the social relationships which make up society achieve an autonomous identity that establishes them as external conditions which determine the activities of the members of society as they enter into

them? In both cases, society is seen to consist of relationships between its members which are structured, or organized, in particular ways and so has an objective existence. However, the first argument treats society and its structures as composed out of the actions of its individual members who are agents of their own actions and produce their relationships with one another in terms of this agency; whilst the second argument treats society and its structures as a **system** of relationships that determines the activities of the members of society through the ways in which it works as a system that conditions how people are able to behave within it. This is our dichotomy.

Both positions have been taken up in sociological theory, usually in opposition to one another, and the dispute between the two arguments continues to be an issue of contemporary debate. We may loosely refer to the two positions as individualistic, voluntaristic or action sociology as opposed to holistic, deterministic or structuralist sociology. However, what I want to suggest is that the assertion of one position rather than the other leads to irresolvable problems in both cases when one is attempting to deal with the actual nature of social relationships. Moreover, the effort to reconcile the two positions by arguing that social relationships are a product of human agency and also condition social activity within society often only restates the problem that social relationships are relationships between active individuals and an objectively existent society, without necessarily resolving it by showing how social action both produces and is a product of society at one and the same time. Let us outline first, then, the general features of the two positions as they argue about the nature of society, before moving into a more detailed investigation of the ideas of major sociological theorists who take up one or the other of these two positions or attempt to reconcile them as they seek to investigate and explain the nature of society and the bases of its organization (Cuff and Payne 1979).

The foundation of the **structuralist** position lies in the argument that human beings are essentially social creatures who by their very nature are made by their social habitat which is society. On this basis it makes no sense to talk of human beings as individuals as though they can and do exist independently of the social context in which they necessarily live together with one another. Indeed the very content and character of the interests, purposes and values which they espouse as persons, the motives which precipitate their actions, and the kinds of personality traits they develop can be seen to derive from the social world which they inhabit. Even individuality itself is argued to be a product of a certain kind of society – the modern industrial world – which generates a kind and sense of personal identity because of the way in which it is organized at the level of the social relationships of which it is composed.

What then is society in these terms? Essentially it is a phenomenon that exists as an autonomous reality in its own right: it is, as Émile Durkheim puts it, *sui generis* (existing in its own right) and irreducible to any other

level of human existence, be it biological or psychological (Durkheim 1964a). Although, of course, society cannot exist without its individual members, it is not an aggregate of individuals but an emergent reality that results from the association between them, and the properties which it possesses stem from this association itself and not from the characteristics of the individuals who engage in this association. If it stemmed from the latter then society could be explained in terms of psychology, which structuralist sociology wants to argue that it cannot. Instead, structuralist sociology argues that human association, that is social relationships, creates a wholly new reality (as does, we might note, the right combination of oxygen and hydrogen in the physical world when water is created) which is a world of social facts. These social facts are the typical patterns of action and relationships that constitute the structures and institutions which make up society in the form of phenomena such as social class, the family, work, the state, etc. That these structures and institutions have a seemingly abstract character that makes them somewhat less visible than the individual by no means undermines their essential reality which can be detected and measured by the ways in which they determine the behaviour of the members of society. This is apparent from how the position of the individuals within these structures and institutions comes to determine what they can and cannot do and what in fact they do do, and the essential typicality of how all individuals in the same structural and institutional positions engage in the same (i.e. typical) kinds of actions as one another despite the fact that they are different people. This is easily evidenced by the invariant character of such behaviour which all of us as members of society commonsensically, let alone sociologically, rely upon in order to relate to one another at all and the world in which we live. For example, a lecture is recognizable as such by lecturers and students and participated in by both because it involves a typical form of behaviour on the part of both, irrespective of the personal idiosyncrasies of lecturers and students: if it was the latter that determined the nature of a lecture then it would possess an infinite variability of behaviour that would make it impossible to be a recognizable activity, namely a lecture, at all. These structures and institutions, then, play a regulative role in social life and they have a history and autonomy that transcend the purely personal to the point where they constrain the behaviour of the members of society as well as enabling them to interact with one another. They are conditions which govern social life, and the bases on which they emerge and work have to be understood in terms of what gave rise to them historically and what factors keep them in operation.

At this point different kinds of structuralist theories vary as to how they explain structures and institutions. On the one hand theorists of a Marxist and neo-Marxist persuasion argue that the structural organization of social relationships derives from the collective organization of the processes of production through which a material basis is provided for the existence of

society, so that social relationships have an essentially economic foundation (Bottomore and Rubel 1965). On the other hand, culturalist theories such as those of Durkheim, and functionalism, argue that there are certain basic and environmentally determined conditions to which society has to adapt in order for social life to be possible, which it does through the cultural creation of institutions and structures that provide solutions to the problems that these conditions create. In both cases what emerges is a system of social relationships which has a fixed and determining character for the behaviour of the persons participating in them, either in terms of a particular mode of economic production in which the individual is constrained to engage in work and productive activity, and of how that mode of production is organized materially, technologically and managerially, or in terms of a culture with collective values and rules which are inculcated into the individual through a process of socialization as he or she enters into and progresses through society. In both cases, society is being treated as a system of structures and institutions in which its members take up particular positions in the form of roles which then determine how they can act within them, but it is the way that system works internally in terms of its own logic that is the basis of the social organization of society and therefore the determinant of the behaviour of the members of society. Indeed culturalist theories, such as those of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, go even further than this to suggest that the very nature of culture itself which finds its expression in symbols and myths is a kind of language which has its own internal and underlying grammar that determines what kind of meaning can be imposed upon life and the world. So it is not that the members of society actively use the culture to make sense of life and the world for themselves, but rather that they are unconscious vehicles through which the culture speaks so that it determines how they are able to see and do things. At its most extreme, then, structuralist sociology treats society as an autonomous entity composed of structures and institutions that impose themselves upon and control the actions of the members of society by organizing themselves in terms of their own logic, which is dictated by the economic and cultural factors that have produced it and which are extra-individual. Thus the degree to which the members of society are agents of their own existence and their relationships with one another is quite minimal, since not only are their actions determined by their position within structures and institutions but so too are their thoughts, values and interests. If you like, then, the only agent of social action is structure itself (Cohen 1968).

The opposite action position in sociology rejects this systemic structuralism on the grounds that it leads to a dehumanized version of the social world through an illegitimate reification of society which completely objectifies structures and institutions and divorces them from the actual activities of the members of society as individuals within it. From this perspective society is not an immutable and determining force which externally

conditions the lives of its members, but rather they are agents who produce and sustain it. Human beings can and do make themselves into what they are; they are able to take charge of their own lives and to shape the social world into forms which meet their own needs. History is not a matter of some inexorable and autonomous process of change; rather, changes occur because human beings make them occur. Society, then, consists of the deeds of its members and they are the authors of them. The starting point for the action position in relationship to the nature of society is the individual and his or her action, which is essentially and subjectively meaningful to the individual in the sense that it is directed and undertaken in terms of the interests, purposes, values and motives of the individual as a subject in the light of his or her needs. Social interaction and therefore social relationships arise from the fact that the satisfaction of need and the pursuit of interests requires the co-operation, collaboration or control of other individuals in a similar position. This leads to the development and construction of mutual forms of the regulation and organization of relationships between individuals that are based upon a reciprocity of understanding and expectations which then license and control their interactions with one another. So society emerges as a community of individuals which has an objective degree of autonomy in the sense that it consists of intersubjective relationships between its members based on collective understanding and expectation that are embodied in collective rules and forms of organization. But these understandings, expectations and rules and the forms of the organization of interaction which they produce, which are the structures and institutions of society, are not objects and forces in their own right which take on a life of their own quite independently of the human beings who act in terms of and participate in them. Ultimately structures are what people do together with one another. But to see the structures of society as things is a mistake: to talk of collective phenomena such as social classes, the family, the state, etc. is acceptable only as long as one recognizes that they are a shorthand way of referring to complex patterns of relationships between individuals. Of course these relationships entail typical ways of acting and so we are dealing with structured social activity, but this structuring of social activity takes place from the inside and is not imposed from the outside through the ways in which individuals organize their relationships with one another as agents of them and sustain them on that basis. How so?

Firstly, in order to organize their own actions and interactions with others, individuals have to define situations in particular ways: it is not simply that situations impose themselves upon individuals in some predefined fashion that determines how action and interaction will proceed. For example, it is not possible to understand criminal activity independently of how certain activities are defined as criminal by various people, groups and agencies in society and consequently dealt with on this basis by both criminals and the forces of law and order. Moreover,

sociology needs to pursue this further by looking at how society's members go about connecting up and putting together different aspects of the social world to form a picture of events within it and so conduct their own activities and interactions in the light of and in relation to this. For example, when investigating suicide, as many sociologists have, it is necessary to examine how coroners piece together and decide upon the relevance of the different biographical and situational circumstances of the dead person to see how a verdict of suicide is arrived at, rather than one of accident or murder, and so how the fact of suicide is established and recorded as a fact.

Secondly, the organization of social action requires individuals to take decisions since all situations always offer a variety of possible choices of action within them, and to understand how structure and institutions work requires a knowledge of how this decision-making takes place. For example, it would be impossible to understand bureaucracy without investigating how bureaucrats interpret and choose to implement bureaucratic policies and objectives. Structures and institutions, then, when investigated entail complex and intricate interactions and relationships between human beings who are agents of what they do and not simply products of a system. The social environment is a world of possible and alternative ways of acting which requires decisions and choice on the part of its members as to what to do; and, in making decisions, its members make society as they arrange their relations with one another in the course of living their own lives. This they can and do in a whole variety of ways. However, this does not mean that society can be explained in terms of the psychology of the individual (action sociology is about social action and is not psychologistic); it means only that it is necessary to recognize that human beings are subjects and therefore agents of their actions and that society is an intersubjective world. In this sense society is not an object because social relationships come to be organized into particular forms and patterns through interaction that is based on mutual understanding and expectations which both facilitate and regulate the ways in which it takes place. Society, however, does have an objective existence of its own in the sense that it is an extra-individual phenomenon with a structure and organization that establish it as a reality which is different from the individual but not separate from the active agency of its members: it is how they act together in mutual and reciprocal ways to form a community that constitutes society.

Moreover, as such, society does have a history and force which helps to shape the conduct of activity within it. We are, as members, born into a social world which has been produced over centuries by the multiplicity of choices and decisions made by our ancestors, and we have to live with this inheritance and its effects in making our own choices and decisions. Moreover, we have to live with the fact that the intentions which were embodied in the actions of our ancestors have necessarily had unintended consequences which they could not and did not envisage, and yet have left

a legacy of all forms of social organization in the contemporary world which helps to shape existence in it. History does weigh on the present and human agency does not necessarily entail control over the future. For example, Max Weber points out just how strategic the values and work ethic of ascetic Protestantism were for the contemporary Western world because of the role they played in the development of capitalism by fostering the whole ethos which facilitated its emergence and now sustains its legitimacy as a form of economic organization. Ascetic Protestantism had not intended to do this but was creating a religious ethic designed to assuage fears of damnation and hopefully secure a place in heaven for believers. But the fact that history weighs upon society and that action has unforeseen consequences does not mean that society has emergent properties and law-like qualities that separate it from the activities of its members as a system operating with a logic of its own and externally determining what they do.

The problem with the action approach, however, enters precisely here because in all this discussion of historical circumstances, unintended consequences and the organization of action on a collective basis, what is being tacitly acknowledged is a reality that is quite problematic to address in terms of the individual because it is extra- or supra-individual and clearly does have a degree of determination in relation to human action because it socializes it and in doing so organizes it in particular kinds of ways. The socialization and organization come from the existence of structures and institutions which have a regulatory and directive character that is enforceable, and they have an impersonal nature in themselves however personally they come to be inhabited. It is simply not true that society can be modified and transformed at the will of its members in any way that they want, because structures and institutions do have an organizational foundation which is rooted in things like economic conditions, power bases, administrative needs, environmental conditions and resources, technological developments, the biological and psychological parameters of human nature, the logic of forms of knowledge, historical events and circumstances and so on; none of these are necessarily individual and personal as such, and they give structures and institutions a degree of autonomy in terms of how they work. Moreover, this autonomy is recognizable in the fact that they cannot be reduced to and investigated at any level other than that on which they exist. The argument that structures and institutions like class, the family, the state, etc. can be replaced by and investigated at the level of descriptions of what individuals do falls apart when sociologists attempt to analyse them in these terms. This is because what individuals are doing only makes sense when we describe it in terms of the structures and institutions in which the activity is implicated. For example, what fathers do as fathers only makes sense in terms of the existence of the family of which the father is a part. As such, what this recognizes is that society is made up not simply of individuals but of people who occupy positions in

the various structures and institutions of society which organize what they do, the ways in which they do it and so the typicality of their behaviour. The argument that people act in terms of their own needs, interests, purposes and values and that they are agents on this basis must also recognize how all of these too have much of their derivation in the culture of the society in which the individual lives and how that, however differentiated, is collective and operates at the level of communal meaning, symbols, myths, classification, schemes, etc. which are all embodied in and as languages whose organization and use are social and not personal (Rex 1961).

The problem of the issue of structure and agency in social life, then, is clear even if the resolution of it is not. On the one hand, society is not a system of immutable and reified structures and institutions operating as a law-like system of objectively organized relationships that determines all action within it. Human beings are not simply cogs in a machine or puppets on a string because they can and do make sense of their social environment, exercise choices in relation to it and modify it in a whole variety of ways, which makes them agents in the social world and creators of social structure. To repeat, social structures are what people do together with one another. On the other hand, they do it in the form of structures and institutions which are supra-personal entities with an organizational basis in conditions other than those simply a product of human need and interest; which cannot be transformed just at will by human beings; and which do have a regulatory and directive effect on human behaviour in society since they are the basis of its sociality. Now, having said this, is the problem of structure and agency one which can only be stated as a paradox, or one on which sociologists can only take sides, or are there ways of moving to some resolution of it, however limited this might be? The issue is crucial because more is at stake than just sociology: in the end it raises the question of what human beings are and what they can and cannot do in practice. What I want to look at now is how a number of major sociologies and sociologists have dealt with this.

Within classical sociology the tendency of various major thinkers has been to take sides, although built into these arguments has always been an undertow in the direction of the opposite position, however faint. On the structuralist side, we find the thought of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and the theory of functionalism (Cohen 1968). Marx's conception of society has its grounds in a theory of action: as he put it, human beings make their own history. But Marx goes on to argue that they do this in circumstances which are not of their own choosing, and he develops an analysis of how action is organized by these circumstances as material conditions of production which structure and determine the social relationships that are primarily generated by the particular material forces of production utilized, which include not only raw materials but also the technology which is used to extract and work them into products. So, historically, societies can be

distinguished in terms of the particular material mode of production which is their foundation and which structures the social relationships between the members of a society on the basis of the division of labour which is entailed in it. This constitutes the historical and practical circumstances of social life from which arise the forms of consciousness, culture and institutions of society, i.e. the superstructure of society. As the mode of production produces a surplus of products and wealth in society, so the structure of productive relationships within it (the social structure) that emerges is a hierarchical structure of ownership and control over the forces of production which creates different classes in society (primarily a ruling class who own the means of production and a subordinate class whose labour is either owned by or sold to the ruling class for its use in production). These classes, in turn, have objective and opposing interests by virtue of their position within the social relations of production which determines their consciousness. Futhermore the ruling class, by virtue of its ownership of the means of production, owns the means for the production of ideas and institutions in society too, and these are produced in terms of the interests of that ruling class and legitimate its position of ownership and power in society both institutionally and ideologically.

So, for Marx, the material forces of production create a mode of production which is a system of social relationships that is determined by it and which generates the whole institutional and cultural framework of society. At the heart of this social system is the class structure of society which differentiates its members into opposed social groups with competing interests, and this determines how individuals participate in society and the ways in which they act within it; processes of historical development are propelled by the struggles between classes that the changes in the mode of production induce. Capitalism, as a mode of production, is an economic system of manufacture and exchange which is geared towards the production and sale of commodities within a market for profit, where the manufacture of commodities consists of the use of the formally free labour of workers in exchange for a wage to create commodities in which the manufacturer extracts surplus value from the labour of the worker in terms of the difference between the wage paid to the worker and the value of the commodity produced by him/her to generate that profit. So, Marx argues, the labour of the worker is objectified through its sale to and use by the manufacturer, and thus the worker is alienated from his or her own existence as a subject and the life of the worker is determined by the fate of the commodities which he or she produces for the market, which is governed by the laws of supply and demand and the search for profit on which the manufacture of commodities depends in the capitalist system. Thus the capitalist system of production creates a market economy in which a hierarchical class structure emerges, consisting of a ruling capitalist class (the bourgeoisie) who own the labour of a subordinate exploited working class (the proletariat) who live in a situation of impoverished and alienated

conditions which shape their lives and actions since these are enforced upon them by the capitalist system itself. As such the interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are necessarily opposed and this sets up objective conditions of conflict and struggle between them into which both classes are inevitably drawn by the way in which the capitalist system works as structures of exploitative and alienated social relationships.

In these terms then it is clear that, for Marx, human action as productive activity is circumscribed by the material conditions within which it takes place and which establish its organizational limits and structure the social relationships that emerge between the members of society and the institutional forms which they can take. Any attempt to explain capitalism as relationships of economic exchange based upon the pursuit of individual self-interest, leading to the creation of a division of labour and contractual relationships between the members of society based upon the co-operation and free exchange of goods and services between them which they created through their labour, has to face the fact that the relationship between worker and employer is located in a whole system of economic production which determines how labour is sold and utilized in productive activity by a market economy that is geared to profit. Neither the worker nor the capitalist is free to organize their activities within a capitalist market system: rather the market system demands that the worker sells his or her labour on the basis of what the employer is prepared to pay for it and this, in turn, is determined by the need of the employer to produce a profit in the production of commodities in the face of the competition from other capitalist producers in the market. Both worker and employer are caught up in the way that the capitalist market works, and their respective interests and actions are dictated by the position which they occupy within it. It is not individual self-interest which determines their actions but the marketplace itself which structures what those interests are and how they can be pursued at the level of action: in the one case it is the ever more determined need to make a profit and in the other it is the ever more determined need to earn a living wage. But the market opposes these two needs to one another since profit can only be achieved by minimizing the costs of production which entails controlling and reducing the cost of labour, i.e. wages.

Yet, of course, Marx as a revolutionary needs to argue that this capitalist system is one which human beings can change and so he needs to bring back human agency into his account of economic activity and the material work of production which structures the social relationships of society. He does this by arguing that, ultimately, the conditions which govern social relationships within a particular mode of production can be changed by human activity once it is recognized by those who are subject to it – that the mode of production is not a naturally given phenomenon but a historical product. To do this the members of society must become conscious of how, by organizing the mode of production on a particular basis,

they become subject to its forms of determination over their lives and so develop new forms of production which generate social relationships that meet their own needs and interests. Note, however, that this requires collective and not individual action on the basis of a new organization of the mode of production which restructures social relationships according to the new material conditions which it produces. But this change is only possible if the forces of production have themselves begun to change: in the case of the transition from capitalism to socialism the change is only possible because capitalism is already a mode of production based upon the social organization of labour power as the basis of manufacture which makes possible the social control of production by producers themselves, i.e. the workforce or the proletariat.

So, for Marx, the basis on which the proletariat can become agents of the creation of a society which meets and expresses their needs is still conditional on the emergence of a system of production which creates the conditions in which they can become agents of their own lives, namely a productive system in which the co-operative exercise of their labour power is the objective material basis of social life. That is why, for Marx, capitalism was the necessary precursor of socialism. It created the material conditions for the emergence of socialism in which human beings could seize control of their own labour power since it was that on which capitalist production was based: all that was needed was that the private ownership of labour power be replaced by the collective control of labour power by the labour force itself. Through this the proletariat could seize control of their own lives and create a society tailored to their own needs. In this sense, then, agency re-enters Marx's account of society in the sense that he sees the possibility of a society whose structures and institutions are produced and sustained on that basis, but it is necessary to recognize that it only becomes possible in terms of the advent of a particular form of material production which opens up the possibility that human beings can collectively control the co-operative use of their labour. At no point does Marx suggest that the human actor is an agent of his or her action but only that social conditions of production can emerge in which actors can become agents. The human actor is a thoroughly social creature whose status as an agent of action is a creation of certain kinds of materially generated social relationships which form his or her personality. The individualism of capitalist society is a false subjectivity promoted by the relations induced by the competitive conditions of the sale of labour and the ownership of wealth and property which the market society of capitalism promotes. A genuine subjectivity can only emerge when human beings control the use of their own labour, but that too depends on a social organization of production in which each produces according to his or her own ability and receives rewards according to his or her own needs. The subject as agent is then a creation of particular social relationships of production that have a material foundation and not the progenitor of them: for Marx, it is that socialist relations of

production create individuality and not that individuality exists *per se* (Bottomore and Rubel 1965).

Durkheim, even more than Marx, provides a structuralist theory of society. His very starting point is to distinguish the nature of society from the individual by arguing that human association creates an entirely new level of reality with its own properties. This realm of reality consists of social facts which are typical forms of the action of human beings, and they derive not from the individual who engages in them but from society itself, which is an external and constraining force upon the individuals who live within it. The original foundation of society is a collective consciousness – a collective body of ideas, values and norms – which binds the members of society into a community through their essential resemblance to one another, as the consciousness of the individual is only a reflection of the collective consciousness installed in each person. Thus Durkheim argues that the nature of social solidarity in simple societies is 'mechanical' and finds its expression and institutionalization in the detailed and comprehensive regulation of the activities of societal members through religiously based and repressive norms and values that sanction their behaviour on a penal basis. There is no individuality in this kind of society, so agency in regard to their own actions is not possible for its members: action is a totally communal phenomenon. However, in a process of historical evolution precipitated by population increase and new forms of communication in society, the nature of social relationships changes as an adaptive response through the emergence of the division of labour which differentiates out social activity within society and ties its members into reciprocal and contractual relationships in terms of the functional interdependence that arises between these activities. Thus a new form of social solidarity emerges, characteristic of complex industrial societies, which is 'organic' and entails a society whose members are bound together as a community by the social and economic ties of exchange that emerge from the performance of tasks and activities within the organizational system of the division of labour. The collective consciousness now shrinks and reduces its role in society as an adaptive response to the emergence of the division of labour to become the normative and regulative framework through which contractual relationships of exchange are established and sustained.

So, in the Durkheimian model of modern society, a system of social relationships is produced by the division of labour and the members of society come to participate in it by taking up positions and roles within it in terms of the tasks which it involves. They are, then, the functionaries of these roles and their actions are determined by how the performance of these roles is dictated by the institutional structures to which they belong through normative regulations and sanctions which are inculcated into the individual through processes of socialization and external constraint. The agency of the actor is confined to the performance of roles within an institutional context that regulates it. Yet Durkheim now comes to argue

that the social differentiation produced by the division of labour in terms of the creation of specialized tasks and activities within society must of necessity create individuality since the performance of specific and specialized activities by its members now comes to distinguish each member from any of the other members. Moreover, the weakened state of the collective consciousness in alliance with this can only create a degree of individual consciousness that is personal and not communal. Modern industrial society responds by elevating and institutionalising the value of individuality to give it a central position within its culture.

But Durkheim does not draw the conclusion from this that society and its structures and institutions are now constructed on the basis of individuals pursuing their own interests as agents of their actions. Rather he argues that just as individuality is a social fact that has been structurally produced through the division of labour, so the preservation of society depends upon the constraint of the individual and the control of the pursuit of self-interest. Too great an autonomy of the individual from the social group precipitates the disintegration of the community which depends on communal values and normative regulation to maintain the social ties between its members, and can even lead to the destruction of the individual himself or herself on the basis of suicide. Social relationships can only be maintained if the freedom of the individual is curtailed through the institutional and normative regulation of social action by the community exercising constraint over the individual that ties him or her back into group life. The foundations of group life, then, are distinct from the individual and self-interest and are not dependent on the latter; and social existence, therefore, requires that the group remains external and controlling in respect of the behaviour of individuals within it through its structural organization and normative regulation of action. Agency, then, must give way to structure if society is to exist and maintain itself, which entails social control over the individual by society through an organized division of labour that maintains a particular structure of social relationships and that is underpinned by a collective consciousness as a regulatory framework for the activities and tasks performed within it.

Functionalism takes the Durkheimian argument about the systemic nature of society as an external and constraining force over the activities of its members even further in a structuralist direction. For functionalism, the structures and institutions of society emerge as an adaptive response to environmental conditions such as the scarcity of material resources, the unsocialized biological and psychological nature of the child, the problems of co-ordinating activities in a social way, etc. produced by the common culture of society in which the structures and institutions that emerge function to meet these conditions. It is not human agency, then, which creates structures and institutions but processes of natural selection in relation to the environmental conditions that generate them, and together they interlock into an autonomous system that is guided, through culture,

by the logic of the adaptation of the social system to its environment. It is the functionality of structures and institutions in these terms that governs the ways in which they work and change, and social relationships are formed between the members of society through them as members come to participate in them by taking up positions and roles in their organization. The performance of roles is governed by institutionally based rules and expectations which are inculcated into individuals through processes of socialization and external sanction so they act in accordance with them. So structures and institutions are part of a larger system operating with its own functional logic that governs how activity is arranged within them, and the agency of individuals is constrained by the organizational and normative regulation of action within them on the basis of the sanction and reward of individuals for conformity. This is built into the individual through socialization processes. Without this conformity, structures and institutions would cease to function in a way that adapts society to its environment. Human agency, then, is required but its organization must necessarily be structurally determined in terms of the needs of the social system as represented by its institutional framework. Other than that, agency threatens a form of deviant action which could only attack the existence of society by undermining the necessary forms which the structural and institutional organization of social relationships takes and on which their functionality depends (Giddens 1976).

In contrast to systems theory in classical sociology with its emphasis on the autonomy of structures and institutions is the work of action theorists who emphasize the voluntaristic and interactional nature of social organization. Of these Weber is the chief protagonist. Weber argues that, ultimately, society is a collection of individuals whose **interactions** with one another constitute social life. Action is by its very nature subjectively meaningful to the actor in the sense that it is determined by the interests, purposes and values of the individual actor and it leads to social interaction only in so far as these are orientated to the actions of other individuals and conducted by them on this basis. So interaction, and therefore social relationships, are organized and thereby structured through shared interests, purposes and values and shaped by actors interacting with one another on this basis. In this way they come to form a community based upon such social organization. Institutions, then, such as the state and social classes are a way of talking about relationships among individuals and the kinds of ways in which as individuals they act, and are not autonomous entities. They have their basis in a shared orientation to the world which leads to the organization of action in terms of a particular rational organization of it which entails the selection of particular means to attain the ends of actors. It is the particular form in terms of which actions are organized on a means/ends basis that constitutes social structure, and institutions are the ways in which collectivities of actors establish fixed patterns of relationships between one another. So actors come to act in typical ways in terms of these

institutions which are legitimated by their shared interests and values which motivate how they act.

Note that it is not socialization which mediates the relationship between institutional arrangements and the typical actions that take place within them, but a common commitment to shared values, interests and purposes (i.e. culture) on the part of actors which leads them to regulate and organize their interactions on a shared motivational basis. Consequently Weber is able to move from this discussion of the various ways in which action and interaction comes to be organized on a means/ends basis through shared interests and values on the part of actors to a discussion of larger-scale structures, institutions, societies and civilizations. Each of these social forms is a culturally and communally organized complex of social interactions that has been established historically on the basis of particular ways of formulating and legitimating interests in terms of values and constructing particular means by which they can be achieved. Indeed, Weber's interest in Western civilization consists in demonstrating how a particular form of the organization of action on an institutional basis grounds the nature of its structure and institutions, and he locates its sources in the Judaeo-Christian values of that civilization and its effects upon the understanding, formulation, creation and resolution of the practical problems of economic organization and political administration that the members of Western society necessarily had to engage with on a historical basis. But they did this as historical agents of their own lives, taking decisions and organizing their social activities on the basis of their own values, purposes, interests and needs. There is no direction to history other than that which emerges from the interaction of individuals as they pursue their interests and values and take decisions in the light of this, and human existence has no meaning other than that which the individual can give to it in terms of the values which he or she espouses and acts upon.

Yet Weber is forced to admit – and here a sense of the autonomy of *structure* emerges – that the outcome of purposeful action does establish patterns of its organization that were not necessarily intended by actors which shape the possibilities of consequent activity, and that, once in place, historical forms of the social organization of action may enforce themselves upon actors in society. The work ethic of ascetic Protestantism that was induced by the religious directives of a calling and predestination which created a disciplined way of life amongst Protestants, and that helped to create a basis for the rational organization of the capitalist economy, may have been an option for Protestants but is now enforceable on the inhabitants of capitalist societies by virtue of its legitimation within capitalism and the organization of economic and social life in terms of it. Equally so the technical efficiency and superiority of the bureaucratic administration of the organization of complex modern societies, once established, presents the members of such societies with no alternative and they must of necessity accept the basis on which bureaucratic administra-

tion works in terms of the organization of their activities. That social structure and institutions are a product of human agency on a historical basis, and are sustained by a continuous commitment to the values and forms of social action which they entail, does not preclude them taking on their own life and structuring social life in terms of this. Weber recognizes as much in his critical assessment of the rationalistic and bureaucratic nature of Western society which reduces its members to cogs in the machinery of the social organization which has been created by this civilization. Even for Weber, then, once structures and institutions have been created by human activity they establish conditions for action within it and cannot simply be changed at the will of actors. Yet ultimately they are what actors do together with one another on the basis of shared beliefs, purposes and means of organizing their relations amongst themselves. The autonomy and objectivity of institutions lies only in their interactional and therefore supra-individual character and not in their existence as entities which have some reality outside of this.

Simmel shares a similar position to Weber. Society is the web of interactions between its members that has its ultimate basis in their purposes and interests as individuals. But the realization of these through interaction organizes it into forms and patterns that achieve a quasi-autonomy over the ways in which individuals act. Although interaction always depends on the fact that individuals influence and are influenced by one another, this congeals in the reciprocal typification of one another's nature and activities on a shared and group basis that structures social relationships. Consequently social action is dictated in terms of these typifications as interactants see and are seen by one another as types of persons engaged in particular forms of action. In this sense the form of the organization of interaction structures the ways in which individuals relate to one another, and the more complex that form becomes within the major institutions of society the less individualistic are the ways in which it can be inhabited and the more impersonal are the relationships which constitute it. So the individual becomes a representative of the institution, occupying a niche within it. As social interaction is organized, identity becomes fixed by it and shapes relationships with others (Runciman 1978).

With symbolic interactionism (which is fully discussed in the chapter 'Active/Passive'), the organization of social life in terms of the subjectively meaningful nature of action and social relationships becomes more closely focused and analysed around the issue of how they are constructed and determined at the level of meaning by the actor as an agent of his or her own behaviour. But it is this paradoxical relationship between both the individual determination of action and its socially structured organization as the basis of the formation of community that becomes the starting point of two major attempts by sociological theorists to reconcile agency and structure with one another, namely the work of Talcott Parsons and Alfred Schutz.

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

Parsons begins by arguing that social life has its foundation in the goal-directed action of the individual which gives it subjective meaning for the actor, and it is directed and organized by the normative orientation of the actor, i.e. by the norms and values in terms of which the actor selects ends and chooses means for their achievement. So action is purposeful and rationally organized by the actor as an agent on a means/ends basis. But the isolated actor is a theoretical fiction because empirically human beings always live in society. Consequently human action can only be understood in terms of the fact that it takes place in the social context of the action of other actors. Necessarily these are interlinked because actors in the pursuit of their goals must face the fact of others in pursuit of the same, but under the conditions that actors need to gain one another's assistance and co-operation to achieve their goals because of the scarcity of resources relative to the wants of all actors. Consequently actors have to find a way of orientating and relating to one another which, Parsons argues, they come to do by developing reciprocal expectations about one another's actions. The more they interact, the more these expectations become fixed and standardized to the point at which they achieve an institutionalized status which now places the actors in a situation of double contingency *vis-à-vis* one another, namely that each actor must orientate not only to his or her own expectations of other actors but also to their expectations of him or her. These two sets of expectations interlock and so come to be the basis on which they interact.

In this way interaction turns into a self-sufficient and regulating system: it develops its own equilibrium because the interactants have a vested interest in maintaining the form of their relationship, for they derive rewards from it in terms of the satisfaction of their goals and this internally sanctions the system; and it has its own boundaries since the interactants will want to keep one another in line in order to maintain it, which gives the system external sanctions that are built into it. In these terms, then, the normative orientation through which actors organize their actions becomes communal in the form of an institutionalized set of reciprocal expectations, and their actions are regulated by this and actors are socialized into acting in accordance with it: this is the nature of the social basis of social action, i.e. the foundation of society. But more, this social organization of action has emergent properties which constitute it as a reality distinct from the individual and produce society, which are:

1 *culture* – a common set of norms and values shared by the interactants;
2 *structure* – an organized pattern of relationships between interactants in which they occupy positions and roles on the basis of how that culture prescribes their rights and obligations *vis-à-vis* one another and so shapes their actions; and
3 *personality* – selves formed by socialization in terms of the internalization of their rights and obligations.

Society works on the basis of a common culture which structures social relationships between its members and is maintained through ensuring its members' conformity through socialization backed by reward and punishment. Social action, then, is the product of society which has its foundation in voluntaristic interaction but is also a regulatory agency of action in itself because of the autonomy of the culture and structures that emerge through interaction.

Having established how interaction produces a system which is society, Parsons goes on to address its nature as a system and the logic in terms of which it works, which takes him in the direction of functionalism. He argues that it is located in an environment which is characterized by conditions of scarce resources, the unsocialized individual, the coexistence of individuals and the legitimation of norms and values which pose it with problems (what Parsons calls functional prerequisites) that have to be resolved for society to exist and maintain itself. This it does by developing specific institutions such as economic arrangements, political arrangements, religion, the family, etc. through its culture that function to satisfy these prerequisites, and these interlock in the ways in which they function to ensure that society is an integrated and functioning whole. Society, as a system, is adapted to its environment and changes as environmental conditions change. What is problematic, however, in this attempt to reconcile agency and structure is that, in treating society as an autonomous and regulatory system operating according to its own logic, Parsons comes to see action within it as determined by the system and the way in which it works. It is no longer the actor who is in charge of his or her actions: rather they stem from his or her position and role in institutions and structures which normatively determine action through socialization and external sanctions. Indeed agency must be controlled and set within certain limits by society because it poses the threat of deviant behaviour which would undermine the system and the conformity with collective norms and values on which it depends (Hamilton 1973).

The solution proposed by Schutz to the problem of the relationship of agency and structure in many ways follows Parsons but poses the societal institutionalization of social action in a different way that avoids treating society as a system which ultimately undermines the idea that human agency plays a part in its organization. Schutz offers a phenomenological reworking of action which concentrates on the way in which action is subjectively meaningful and how society is organized through intersubjective and shared meanings. What characterizes human action is its basis in the consciousness of the actor in which the action is determined and organized in terms of the project which the actor is seeking to fulfil through it and which arises from the biographical situation of the actor which is personal to him or her. This is what gives action subjective meaning. However, the actor is always situated in a social world which he or she recognizes as being composed of other actors and social scenes which are

taken for granted as the natural and factual environment of his or her actions and into which action has to be fitted. Yet the factual nature of society, however much it is taken for granted by actors and accepted as a real world of facts and events by them, is actually created in terms of how they make sense of it and conduct their social relationships on this basis. What sustains its reality for them is the language which they use to describe and make sense of the social world and the ways in which this provides for a common sense of it, i.e. provides for a shared consciousness of it. Using language, the members of society are able to typify their experiences of the world and so construct the actions and events within it as realities. But in order to interact with one another, actors must arrive at a shared sense of the social world which typifies events and circumstances in the same way and so establish a common reality in which they can participate together. This they achieve in the form of common sense which is embodied in language and its use, and which creates a reciprocity of perspectives between actors which is able to discount the biographical differences between them and their personal consciousness to achieve a common consciousness of the world. This constitutes the knowledge of any person in the community about the social world, as opposed to the particular knowledge of particular people which derives from their personal biographical situations. This common consciousness is what counts as a common sense in society.

So the particularity of the consciousness of the individual is overcome by common sense through the use of language which allows the members of a linguistic community to recognize and account for the events of the social world in the same way and so to erect, typify and construct them as the facts of the social world which all of them share. So a shared consciousness, produced through the use of language, leads to the social construction of reality and establishes this reality as the objective environment for action within it through the social distribution and use of common-sense knowledge by the members of society. Using this common-sense knowledge, the members of society collectively type social scenes and one another in terms of their relative degree of familiarity and anonymity. They organize their relationships with one another in terms of reciprocal motivation, where the motivation of one actor to achieve his or her own end motivates the other actors to act in accordance with it in order to achieve their own ends. Common-sense knowledge provides a social vocabulary of typical motives in terms of which actors can understand one another's actions and their motivation and so make sense of them and consequently organize their social relationships.

Yet this social world which is constructed through shared common-sense typifications of it, and organized and structured as a world of interaction on that basis, can never become a reality that detaches itself from its interactional and constructed basis, however much it is taken as being an objective environment of facts, events and actions by its members. This is because, ultimately, the nature of social scenes is always a matter of

negotiating their reality by the members of society as they interact with one another on a common-sense basis; and because interactants, however they organize action on the basis of reciprocal motivation, can never comprehend the actions of one another beyond the point of knowing and engaging with one another for all practical purposes. In other words, interaction and social life are always a continuous achievement on the occasion of interaction, in which a practical sense of the situation and the actions taking place within it is arrived at by participants that is sufficient for them to organize and manage social relationships between themselves, but this does not eliminate the fact that ultimately action is motivated by the biographical situation of the actor which lies behind and goes beyond this. That actors can and do engage in intersubjective relationships which are socially organized on the basis of common-sense knowledge does not make them something other than individuals too, at the same time, with their own motives and purposes. It is only that they achieve them together through the use of common-sense knowledge which creates a shared sense of the reality of the social world, but this reality is negotiated and constrains action only on this basis of its negotiated character. So, for Schutz, society is indeed an objective, real and communal world for its members but it is actually constituted by its members on a continuous basis through the use of common-sense knowledge, as embodied in language, which they share with one another and bring to bear on one another's actions and the social scenes in which they take place on a practical day-to-day basis. It has a structure because the members of society structure the events within it and organize their relationships with one another through their common ways of making sense of it. It is the real and objective world in which they live but it is produced by their activities (Schutz 1972).

However, contemporary sociology would argue that the phenomenological sociology of Schutz offers an account of society which is altogether too subjectivist. It too turns to language to explain the organization of social life, but it tends to eliminate the subject altogether in terms of its sense of how social life is organized on this basis by emphasizing the determining character of language. Both structuralism and post-structuralism (which are more fully discussed in the chapter 'Modernity/Postmodernity') argue that human beings are communicating creatures using language. In these terms the world is a linguistic invention as language is a grid imposed upon the chaos of appearances. In this sense language does not correspond to things but is an arbitrary system of signs which only make sense within a total linguistic system, and linguistic systems differ from one another in terms of the codes on which they are based. Moreover, it is not that we speak language; rather it precedes and speaks to us as we learn it and thus determines our consciousness as human beings but unconsciously. It is not the intention of the speaker which determines what language means but the structure of that language, and this structure is based on an organized system of oppositions between words which determines their meaning in

terms of their contrast with other words, e.g. red is red because it is not green, blue, etc., and not because it captures some essential reality which is redness. What can be said and have meaning in language is what the structure of that language permits, i.e. it is determined by the grammar on which that language is based. The relationship between words as signs and what they signify, then, is entirely arbitrary and constituted by language itself: it is part of the code with which that language operates and thus how that language codifies things and gives them meaning and reality.

Using this, and drawing upon Durkheim's late work which focuses upon the symbolic organization of social life, Lévi-Strauss treats culture as a language which structures and organizes society through representing its nature for its inhabitants and so determining the ways in which they can relate to one another. It is a language of mythology whose grammar constructs things in terms of the binary oppositions between events – the living versus the dead, human versus animal, male versus female, etc. – in which these contrasts allow the members of society to culturally represent and practically resolve the contradictions and conflicts that exist in their lives and their world. The meaning of these myths, then, is determined by the oppositions which are built into every myth and the oppositions between each myth and all of the other myths of a society's mythological system. It is the logic in terms of which they are organized as myths that gives them their meaning. So what the inhabitants who tell and listen to these myths think about them is irrelevant to their meaning since this is determined by their internal structure which gives them meaning through the pattern of oppositions which is generated by and in them. They have their own laws and these speak through the people who tell them and listen to them and thus organize their lives in ways of which they are unaware because they are subject to these laws. The source of the laws which govern mythology – the mytho-logic of myths – lies not in the intentions and consciousness of people, according to Lévi-Strauss, but is a function of the nature of the human mind itself which naturally thinks in terms of binary oppositions: the human mind is a mythological mind by its very nature because this is how mind works. Society is a product of an underlying system of relationships between its material and cultural elements that is mythologically languaged and thus structures and controls social relationships within it on this basis.

In contrast to the cultural structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser produces a materialist structuralism which reconstructs Marxism in these terms on the grounds that it represents the true nature of Marx's thought. He argues that the social formations of society which constitute it are produced by the underlying system of interrelationships between its economic, political and ideological structures. Society, then, has a material existence. In this the culture of society may play a part in creating and reproducing the structures of society but as a material structure itself. Culture is the system of representations secreted by society: it expresses the

way the members of society live, the social conditions of their existence, and so it determines their consciousness and subjectivity. But culture is ideology, and it is real but ideological because it is necessarily a false representation of existence. Although human beings cannot live without a representation of their world and their relationship with it, yet this social totality is opaque for the inhabitants who occupy a place within it, and so it needs to be represented mythologically in order to ensure the social cohesion of society. Ideology as culture is the social cement which binds the whole structure together by assigning specific roles in the political economy to individuals and getting them to accept and fill them and so become agents of it. But ideology is given to individuals in the same way as their economic and political relationships, and through its theoretical practices it operates as a structural condition which constitutes them as subjects in the social world by generating the form and content of their subjectivity. Ideology emerges from the mode of production of society and the class struggle and is an agent of class domination within society where the economic, social and political relationships of society can only maintain themselves under the forms of ideological subjection. In capitalist society, this maintenance of the social totality is achieved through the state apparatus (the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the military, etc.) by the ideological state apparatus (education, the family, etc., i.e. civil society): the former secures the political conditions for the operation of the latter. The ruling ideology of capitalism is concentrated in the latter which socializes and interpolates individuals into the existing economic, social and political relationships of capitalist society. Through this socialization, individuals participate in the ideological apparatus of capitalist society and become constituted as subjects through their subjection to ideology by their incorporation into its theoretical practices. The subject, then, disappears and with it human agency in society, since the individual is a product of the system and how it works and not a producer of it through his or her own conscious and purposeful activity.

Poststructuralist theory, such as that of Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault, retains this sense of the materiality of language and consciousness and the conditioning part it plays in the generation and construction of social reality, but it radically historicizes it. In doing so it rejects the conception of a unitary human nature to which structuralism commits itself and substitutes instead a conception of human nature as historically produced by the particular economic, political and social conditions of society which generate their own forms of life, knowledge and consciousness with their own internal constitution, logic and validity. In particular poststructuralism rejects the idea of the transcendent, conscious and self-determining subject, which lies at the heart of modernist Enlightenment and scientific thought, who constitutes the basis for the development of a universal and objective reason and knowledge and who is the agent of historical change. This is the version of individuality to which modern Western society subscribes.

For Baudrillard, contemporary society is a postmodern society which is no longer structured by production in which the individual conforms to its needs but by symbolic exchange. It is a heterogeneous society of different groups with their own codes and practices of everyday life at the level of discourse, lifestyle, bodies, sexuality, communication, etc., and it involves the rejection of the logic of production and its instrumental rationality that dominated the modernist society of capitalism. Capitalism now has been replaced by a consumer society which is characterized by a proliferation of signs, the media and their messages, environmental design, cybernetic steering systems, contemporary art and a sign culture. It is a society of simulations based on new forms of technology and culture. Signs now take on a life of their own and come to be the primary determinants of social experience. Signs and codes replace reality and the world is experienced through images (simulation) to the point where the real as something different from the image disappears. A world of hyper-reality is created in which everything in the world is simulated in the sense that models created by images replace the real, e.g. ideal sex in sex manuals replaces sex, television news replaces the real news events themselves, politics is the packaging of candidates etc.

So implosion is the key to the postmodern world in which a process of entropy sets in: meanings and messages neutralize one another in a constant flow of information, advertising, entertainment and politics. People are sucked into a black hole of messages trying to solicit them to buy, consume, work, vote, register an opinion, participate in social life, etc., to the point where social divisions and distinctions are no longer evident. So the postmodern world is a world of simulation with no structures and boundaries, an artificial creation in which reality disappears into a haze of images and signs. Human agency disappears under the weight of signs and images created by the technologies of postmodern society which function as mechanisms of social control over its inhabitants. Yet, even so, Baudrillard suggests the possibility of agency in this kind of society through a counter-cultural politics, particularly by marginal groups, that creates new cultures, codes and everyday practices to challenge and change this society. But ultimately he rejects politics (and, with it, human agency) on the grounds that once knowledge entailed a demystification of reality, whereas now all knowledge is simply interpretation with no secure foundation. All political action could do is lead to a cancerous growth of interpretations which only increases the hyper-reality of society. Nihilism and political cynicism, then, are the only response that is possible for its inhabitants to adopt in such a society as nothing of account can really be said and done in it (Bauman 1992).

From the perspective of Foucault, Baudrillard's focus upon the media, consumption, fashion, leisure, etc. as contemporary mechanisms of power and social control and reproduction really leaves the important structures of postmodern society under-characterized. There is more to power and social control than this. So, whereas Baudrillard shows how social differentiation

implodes through semiotic and media power, Foucault shows how discipline and power in modern society segregate, differentiate, hierarchalize, marginalize and exclude people in it. All societies are organized in terms of discursive practices which are knowledge-based systems of language embodied in social practices that have their own rationality and a historical foundation and constitute the basis of administration and control in them. So knowledge is power and a form of governance. Foucault calls postmodern society a carceral society based upon a moral technology of social control embodied in Enlightenment and scientific discourse and its practices, which submit the inhabitants of society and their bodies to control through their minds on the basis of particular ideas that are treated as possessing an objective universality and moral necessity. The form which this power takes is embodied in supervision and surveillance which exacts control through enforcing discipline on people. It entails a panopticon vision which, through its practices of organizing all social activities spatially (workshops, cells, hospital wards, etc.), collectively (factories, schools, barracks, etc.), control-wise (timetabling, scheduling, regularizing, etc.) and in terms of a hierarchy of supervision (delegation, ranks, etc.), creates a disciplined social environment that forms docile bodies by producing order through the supervision of every fragment of the lives of people in it via formal regulations and informal surveillance to make sure everyone conforms. This discipline, which is disguised in and by utopian values, is designed to create a moral transformation of the individual which makes him or her the hard-working, conscience-ridden and useful creature that is required by the tactics of production and warfare in the rational, efficient and technical contemporary society. It is a form of discipline and technology of control that thrives on normalizing judgement based on the rational and scientific knowledge perpetuated by academics and professionals, which analyses and categorizes human beings in particular ways and into which they are inculcated by its disciplinary and supervisory practices. It carries with it the right to punish people who do not fit into its categories of normality and sociality.

So knowledge and power come together in the production of the disciplined individual in all social activities in contemporary society through its discursive organizational practices, and this is the form of governmentality in it. Moreover, this disciplinary organization of contemporary society in terms of surveillance is anonymous, dispersed and comprehensive: it is not in the hands of any particular groups within society and all within society are subject to it. So knowledge is power and creates the subject (the individual) through its rituals of truth and practices of discipline and governance: it generates technologies of the soul through which the members of society inhabit it in terms of the enforcement and internalization of normalcy. There is no subject, then, other than that which the discursive practices of society produce, and so the idea of agency in the creation of society by individuals in terms of their conscious, purposeful actions is both naive and mistaken.

Yet Foucault is forced to recognize the possibility of resistance to the discursive practices of contemporary society and its forms of government by exploding the bases of the objectivity and legitimacy of the knowledge on which they are based, by showing its historical contingency and by demonstrating the power which is embodied therein. This entails the possibility of agency and self-determination in relationship to the discursive practices of modern society. It involves creating a discourse politics in which marginal groups can contest the straitjacket of normal identities imposed by hegemonic discourses to release differences that articulate people's needs and demands, and a bio-politics that reinvents the body by creating new modes of desire and pleasure. Both strategies risk marginalization and exclusion because the norms and rules of the dominant discourse define what is rational, sane and true, but both strategies carry the potential of new forms of subjectivity and values.

Moreover, in his late work, Foucault begins now to examine how individuals can transform their own subjectivities through techniques of the care of the self in which discipline may no longer necessarily be an instrument of domination. In this he contrasts Graeco-Roman ethics, in which desire was an area of human existence requiring moderation and self-control because of its potentially self-destructive nature, and in which it was admirable to turn one's life into a work of art through self-mastery and ethical stylization, with Judaeo-Christian ethics, which saw desire as evil by its very nature and as needing to be renounced and thus policed it through ethical interactions and rigid moral codification. Modern Western culture has perpetuated this in a new scientific mode. The former, then, entails an attempt to constitute oneself as a free self, and Graeco-Roman ethics offers us, in contemporary society, a model which can be drawn upon but not exactly repeated for the reinvention of the self as an autonomous and self-governing being as opposed to the self produced by the coercive and normalizing institutions of contemporary society. In arguing this the subject is not seen by Foucault as having an inner essence: it is still discursively and socially conditioned and situated within power relations. However, he now argues, individuals do have the power to define their identities, master their own bodies and desires and forgo practices of freedom for themselves but in a dialectical relationship to a constraining social field that seeks to impose limits on the individual. Self-mastery and stylized existence are how one can potentially maintain self-autonomy in relation to it, but this involves, too, the formation of oneself as a critical thinker and moral agent.

So the issue of agency and structure continues to remain a topic of contemporary sociological debate in the sense that every conception of social structure must ultimately reduce to what people do in society, yet society always consists of particular and institutionalized forms of the organization of these actions. These cannot work, however, without the commitment of actors to them. The question of structure and agency then is whether this commitment is simply enforced or entirely volunteered, and how it is

possible for it to be a combination of both so that social structure is both achieved by and constitutive of social action. The point is: under what conditions and how does this occur?

KEY CONCEPTS

STRUCTURE This concept is central to sociology, it is usually employed to refer to any recurring patterns of social behaviour. Such behaviour, because it is common and regular, has a constraining effect on other people and we all tend to act in accord with the pressures exercised by social structure, e.g. we stand in queues; our relationships follow a common pattern.

AGENCY This concept is used to express the degree of free will that is exercised by the individual in their social action. We express our agency according to the degree of constraint we experience from the structure. Some people have less agency than others because of structural factors like poverty, and some circumstances create less agency for all, like an oppressive political state.

System A term usually used to describe a theory. Systems theory supposes that the social world is organized in terms of overlapping and interlocking systems that operate in a reciprocal manner. Thus society comprises the political; educational; occupational; economic; family and kinship systems and so on, and they all contribute to the whole. Such a theory implies a grand plan.

Structuralism This is a complex social theory that crosses a number of disciplines. It rests on the belief that at a fundamental level of mind all people share identical qualities. Thus whatever differences we produce, across space or time, in our languages, kinship patterns, myths, and customs, these are only surface differences. At a deep structural level all behaviour is reducible to a similar set of causes.

Functionalism This is an influential theory that developed in sociology and anthropology before the 1960s. It supposes that all social action and all social institutions operate with a purpose, that is, they function to the benefit of the totality. The causes of all behaviour can thus be explained in terms of function. Such a theory has trouble explaining behaviour that it sees as deviant, destructive and therefore dysfunctional.

Interactionism A social theory that does not presuppose the nature of society, rather it believes that people create meanings and reality in their day-to-day interactions and that such meanings depend upon affirmation in interaction.