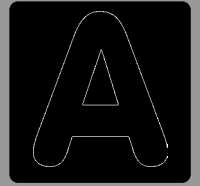


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AS Level and A Level

Sociology

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1

The sociological perspective

Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of the origins of sociology, its key concepts and theories and its differences from and similarities with other social science subjects. The relationship between sociology and social policy is examined and this is followed by a discussion of whether sociology can and should be based on the methods of the natural sciences. The chapter continues with a review of the main sociological theories, including the functionalist, Marxist, interactionist, feminist and post-modernist perspectives. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of socialisation and the processes involved in the construction of social identities. The concepts of social order and social control are examined and the chapter concludes by considering what is meant by culture and subcultures.

The study of society

Sociology has been studied as an academic discipline for around 150 years. The factors that brought about industrialisation, **urbanisation** and the growth of the **nation-state** in the nineteenth century also provided the context in which the idea of studying society in a detailed and systematic way first gained acceptance. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) is credited with formulating the word ‘sociology’. He derived it from ‘socius’ – a society (Latin) and ‘logos’ – knowledge, or word (Greek). Comte believed that sociology was to be the crowning glory of human studies – the ‘Queen of the Sciences’. Although modern sociologists are rather more modest in their claims, there is still a sense that sociology is something special and quite different from other subjects.

A basic definition of sociology is: ‘The systematic study of human society, dedicated to the understanding of social interaction as people form groups, communities and societies’. To say that sociology is a ‘systematic study’ implies that it is not ‘just common sense’, and is more than statements of the obvious. There is a great difference between being an observer of social life as it happens – everyone does that – and undertaking a systematic study based on sociological theories and methods. Sociology is an academic discipline, and as such it is bound by certain rules of evidence. Moreover, the sociologist tries to be **objective** and not let personal opinions and

prejudices influence his or her work. Sociologists seek to define terms precisely and to use appropriate methods of investigation. Most importantly, they are committed to looking beyond commonsense explanations and beyond ‘the official view’ in an effort to explain why things are as they are in a society and why they change.

Concepts and theories

Like the other social sciences – economics, politics, psychology and anthropology – sociology has its own theories, concepts and methods of investigating social behaviour. Sociologists do not simply collect ‘facts’ about social behaviour – crime rates, patterns of divorce, voting habits and so on. By themselves such items of information tell us little about how a society operates. They need to be interpreted to be of interest to the sociologist and this is where theory comes in. Theory provides a framework for fitting together the miscellany of facts with which sociologists are bombarded.

It is important to understand the nature of theories. Let’s begin with concepts: these are general ideas such as ‘**authority**’, ‘**ethnicity**’, ‘**social class**’, etc. Theories are concepts brought together in order to explain something. They set out to explain the relationship between one set of concepts or facts and another, e.g. theories have been put forward to explain the high rate of certain types of crime associated with young

2 The sociological perspective

working-class males. Much sociological research involves taking theoretical concepts and operationalising them or exposing them in such a way as to make them measurable.

Perspectives

When a number of similar theories are drawn together into a single approach, we term this a '**perspective**'. The main perspectives in sociology – **functionalist**, **Marxist**, **feminist**, interactionist, and **post-modernist** – are outlined later in the chapter. Quite simply a perspective is a way of looking at things that helps us to understand what is going on. We can liken a perspective to a pair of glasses: when we put them on, we see things more clearly. So we can put on our functionalist glasses (the perspective made up of various functionalist theories) to help us understand the **consensus** and harmony that we find in society. Alternatively, we can put on the conflict perspective to understand disharmony or strife. The interactionist perspective acts like a magnifying glass, enabling us to understand small-scale human interactions. Each perspective enables us to view society in a slightly different way. Likewise, the competing perspectives all have their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Methods of investigation

Sociologists employ a range of techniques to collect data. Data are necessary to verify theory. Sociology is **empirical** – it seeks to make statements about social behaviour that can be corroborated by evidence from the real world. It is the data which sociologists collect that provide such evidence.

As you will discover in the next chapter, different techniques of investigation produce different types of data. Generally speaking there are two types of data: **quantitative** and **qualitative**. Quantitative data are statistical in form and are generated by the survey technique. **Social surveys** are normally large-scale studies that obtain data by either structured **interviews** or **questionnaires**. Qualitative data are generated by a range of non-statistical techniques including open interviews and **participant observation**.

Sociological explanation

There are basically two branches of theory within sociology – *macro* and *micro*. Macro theories focus on society as a whole and aim at establishing the general characteristics of societies. The aim of **macro-**

sociological theory is to answer three basic questions about the nature of society:

- How do societies hold together, or what is the basis of *order* in society?
- What are the sources of *conflict* in society?
- How do societies *change*?

There are two broad schools of macro theory: consensus and conflict, distinguishable by the different answers they give to these questions. In contemporary sociology **functionalism** is the main representative of the consensus school and **Marxism** of the conflict school.

Micro theories focus on the individuals who make up a society, rather than on the society itself. There are two main forms of **micro theory**: **symbolic interactionism** and **ethnomethodology**. Symbolic interactionism is concerned with the principles of face-to-face interaction. Unlike macro theory, which tends to view the individual as a product of his or her society and tries to show the various ways in which the behaviour of individuals is determined by the social structure of which they are a part, micro theory regards the social structure as something created by individuals as they interact in socially meaningful ways. Ethnomethodology is the study of how individuals experience and make sense of the society in which they live.

Sociology and the social sciences

The boundary line between sociology and the other social sciences is not a clear or permanent one. There is a substantial overlap in subject matter between many of the social sciences and several of them use similar methods. To help identify the points of similarity and difference with sociology, we will take a brief look at the other major social sciences – anthropology, psychology, political science and economics.

Social anthropology

Social anthropology and sociology can be said to have almost identical theoretical interests, since they both investigate social and cultural aspects of group behaviour. Additionally, social anthropologists believe human beings are fundamentally alike and share the same basic interests. They therefore study systems of beliefs, and examine the relations between beliefs, customs and institutions and actions.

However, there are two important differences between sociology and social anthropology. Sociologists concentrate more on social relationships than on **culture**, whereas the social anthropologist is

very interested in ideas and beliefs (religious and symbolic) as well as social relationships. The other difference is that social anthropologists typically work in communities that are small scale, simpler technologically and less familiar socially and culturally. They have thus pursued an interest in total social systems, in which all of the members know each other, which is difficult to parallel in complex, large-scale societies.

Psychology

Some psychologists focus on biological processes in explaining human behaviour, while others place greater emphasis on environmental factors. This latter group clearly overlaps with sociologists in terms of fields of interest. Stanley Milgram (1992), for example, in his studies of **conformity** and obedience to authority, has developed many ideas of interest to sociologists, and it is at this point that the divide between the two disciplines becomes somewhat artificial.

Psychology has, however, adhered to a more scientific approach, seeing the laboratory experiment as the most effective means of investigation. By contrast, most sociologists see the laboratory as too isolated from reality to give an adequate description, explanation and prediction of everyday behaviour. Another difference between the two subjects arises from the fact that sociology is the study of the attitudes and behaviour of people as a result of the influences of groups and of the whole society. This emphasis on the communal dimension contrasts sharply with psychology, which is more concerned with studying individual characteristics and which tends to assume the important role of internal factors such as personality and **intelligence** that may be inherited from parents.

Political science

Political scientists are interested in the study of **power**, of authority, and of how we decide whether power is **legitimate** or illegitimate. Sometimes, therefore, they focus on the political institutions of national and local government and sometimes on other behaviour which indicates how political ideology affects what we do, for example the relationship between voting and social class. Questions on the origin and nature of power, explanations of voting behaviour and so on are clearly of interest to both political scientists and sociologists. Moreover, political scientists use many of the same methods of research – questionnaires, interviews, participant observation – that are available to

sociologists. In many ways, therefore, there is very little to separate the two disciplines. Indeed, political science could be seen as a branch of sociology, though the distinctive nature of its subject matter usually means that it is taught as a separate subject in universities. This emphasises the rather arbitrary divisions that are made between the social sciences.

Economics

Economics has been defined as the study of the twin factors of scarcity and choice in the satisfaction of human wants. It differs from sociology in its area of interest, the perspective through which the subject matter is viewed, and in its methodology. Economics is solely interested in one sphere of society, only taking into account others such as the political domain and education insofar as they affect economic activity. Sociology is much more widespread in its interests, examining the inter-relationships between all aspects of society.

This leads to the two disciplines having a different focus on a particular social phenomenon, e.g. a strike. Economists will be interested in the effects the strike might have on levels of demand and supply, unemployment and so on, while sociologists may also be concerned with the personal interactions leading up to the strike situation, its significance for family life, and its possible implications for the power structure of society. Economics has also developed more in the direction of being a science, with one whole body of theory, and the use and accumulation of statistics are seen as important. Sociology has less agreement on methodology, and many sociologists treat the use of statistics with a great deal of suspicion.

In a number of ways, however, these differences should not be exaggerated. There is an increasing realisation of the value of studies combining several techniques and approaches. The development of econometrics (the collection of evidence about economic trends) within economics has meant a greater emphasis on the empirical collection of information, a practice firmly embedded in the sociological tradition.

Sociology and social policy

Social policy refers to the actions that are taken by the government to maintain and improve the welfare of its citizens. It includes social security, health and welfare services, **State** pensions, housing, education, and crime and its treatment. Social policy aims to deal with

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what are defined as potential or actual social problems. Poverty and crime are both examples of social problems that have far-reaching consequences for the individuals concerned and for the society as a whole.

It is sometimes wrongly assumed that sociology is the study of social problems. This misconception arises from the idea that all sociologists are motivated in their work by a concern to find solutions to the various dilemmas and ills that beset society. It is true that social problems are part of what sociologists study. It is also the case that there are some sociologists who want to use sociology as a vehicle for changing society.

However, it is important to recognise that there is a distinction between sociological problems and social problems. A social problem is some aspect of social behaviour that gives rise to conflict in society and/or misery for particular individuals. Unemployment is a clear example of a social problem. However, sociologists do not confine their studies just to social problems. Rather, they are interested in studying any pattern of relationships in society that calls for an explanation. Any social phenomenon, be it 'nice' or 'nasty', that requires explanation is a sociological problem. Social problems (i.e. something identified as harmful to society and needing something done about it) are merely one type of sociological problem. Thus, divorce is both a social problem and a sociological problem, whereas marriage (which sociologists also study) is a sociological problem only.

It is questionable whether there is a general consensus about what are the most important social problems, but the important questions for sociologists to consider are:

- What is considered a social problem?
- Why is it a social problem?
- Who says it is a social problem?
- Why is this issue being considered to the exclusion of others?
- What are the policies proposed and who will benefit from them?

Subjective and objective elements

Social problems tend to have a subjective and an objective element, with interactionists emphasising the former while structuralists emphasise the latter. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the origin of social problems was located in individuals. To some extent this perspective re-emerged in the 1980s. Individuals may experience a problem subjectively – it is their problem and they are

suffering from it. It may cause anxiety, tension, stress or depression. Such subjective feelings may be caused by poverty or unemployment, for example. At the same time unemployment is an 'objective' reality in that it transcends the individual and has structural causes. Its solution lies in collective action and relatively large amounts of investment and spending.

The concept of a social problem is relative. What constitutes a social problem in one society may not be regarded as such in another. Poverty is an example of this. Even within a particular society social problems can be and often are viewed differently. For example, some groups in our society may regard immigration as a problem while others may regard **racism** as a problem.

Voluntary and involuntary problems

Some social problems are 'voluntary', for example divorce and vandalism. Other social problems are 'involuntary' such as being elderly or being a member of a minority group. This distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary may be criticised as many social problems are a mixture of the two. Behaviour is patterned, follows social trends and is influenced by structural forces. To what extent therefore is divorce or unemployment voluntary? Equally it is not so much the involuntary growing old or being a member of a minority group that matters so much as society's 'voluntary' attitudes and response to these phenomena.

Power

It is important to discover where the power lies in the process of identifying and dealing with social problems. This emphasis on power is made largely by Marxists but is accepted by interactionists. The role of the media in developing our 'awareness' of certain social problems to the exclusion of others should not be underestimated and has been highlighted in the work of the Glasgow Media Group, Stan Cohen's work on mods and rockers (1972) and others (see chapter 8).

The poorest in our society and those **marginalised** within it have great difficulty in getting their definitions of the situation accepted by the wider society and the **agenda setters**. This could be due to lack of economic resources or to ideological subjugation and exclusion from the media and seats of power.

Social policies

The existence of social problems suggests that not all members of society are equal beneficiaries of its wealth and institutions. Some may be regarded as

victims of society or trouble-makers within it. What may be at stake is a conflict of **ideologies** and interests. In the formulation of social policy there are many possible means to achieve a given end. The means chosen depend largely on the ideology of those with the power to determine social policy. In order to reduce poverty, some policies (particularly those on the left) advocate a redistribution of **wealth**, a minimum wage and a minimum income. Others argue that in order to reduce poverty we must encourage economic growth; this may lead to increasing inequality but the wealth will trickle down and everyone will benefit. Social policies may have unintended side effects: some right-wingers argue that a minimum wage will have the unintended effect of increasing unemployment and poverty by increasing industry's costs. On the other hand, increasing wealth and income at the top may result in lower productivity due to a lack of incentive to work. It may also result in the creation of an **underclass** with no vested interest in the social and economic system and which therefore poses a threat to social stability.

The list of questions and policy options is endless. Consider the following:

- Is crime best reduced by 'short sharp shocks' or by the creation of more alternatives to custody schemes?
- Do we need more police in patrol cars or more police walking the street?
- Are the interests of the elderly or mentally ill best served by the process of deinstitutionalisation? There is much evidence, for example, that such a process places a great burden on the family and particularly women in the family. This may be regarded as an unintentional consequence or it may be regarded as the result of **patriarchal** attitudes by those in positions to make decisions. It is also necessary to note that the process of deinstitutionalisation – community care – arose due to economic pressure on the **Welfare State** and the problems associated with institutions.
- Should welfare be provided by the State or by the private sector?
- Should welfare benefits be universal or should they be targeted at those who most need them?

Historical development

The relationship between sociology and social policy is not particularly clear from a reading of the writers who laid the foundations of sociological thought. For Auguste Comte, sociology was the new religion, the

scientific humanism that would unravel the laws of human society and lead to rational social planning. Yet Comte's sociology was profoundly **conservative** in nature and advocated a 'wise resignation to the facts'. Such social facts were not open to reason. Comte's sociology was therefore unlikely to give rise to a social policy that played a radical or reforming role, despite his wish that sociology should influence rational social planning.

Some sociologists of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, such as Rowntree and Booth, adopted a much more empirical approach in their sociological investigation of a particular social problem. Even here, though, the relationship between sociology and social policy is quite crude – the main method employed by these sociologists in their demonstration of poverty at the turn of the century in England was that of the exposé.

Importantly, the period 1930–1960 is marked by the increasing attempt by sociology to be accepted as a discipline into the academic world. As part of this (largely successful) process the scientific nature of the discipline was stressed. This included a need to detach the subject from its perceived link with the identification of social problems and consequent social reform.

There is a great deal of controversy within sociology as to whether sociologists should have any direct input into the study of particular social problems or should be involved in espousing particular social policies. This is due to the desire on the part of some sociologists to produce value-free sociology and themselves remain neutral. Such a desire is linked to conceptions of what constitutes science and indeed what constitutes social science or sociology. It is also linked to a desire to be accepted into the academic establishment, to secure adequate funding and to get one's research actually used.

Weber

Writing in the early part of this century, Max Weber (1904–5) was at pains to clarify the role of sociology in social research. He makes a clear distinction between research and researcher when he states that 'To apply the results of [sociological] analysis in the making of decisions ... is not a task which science can undertake; it is rather the task of the acting, willing person: he weighs and chooses from among the values involved according to his own conscience and his personal view of the world. Science can make him realise that all action and naturally, according to the

circumstances, inaction imply in their consequences the espousal of certain values and ... the rejection of certain others.'

Weber accepted that it is within the role of a sociologist to choose the social problems they wish to consider but emphasised that the actual research must be strictly objective. He also wished to distinguish sharply between sociology and social policy which he saw as two different 'worlds', both of which are valuable but whose distinctions and ways of working should be made clear. In discussing Weber on this subject, James Coleman (1979) draws on the analogy of the two worlds of discipline and action, with sociology being in the world of discipline and social policy being in the world of action. The term 'discipline' in this context means an area of academic study. The world of discipline is pure and value-free; the world of action is impure, laden with conflicting interest groups, may be secretive and is not value-free. The sociologist treads a wary line between the two worlds.

Weber's conception of the relationship between sociology and social policy is that sociology provides the technical information from which policy makers decide social policy. In this respect Weber is a technician. Much of American empirical sociology since the Second World War has been of this technical nature. Clearly not all sociologists take this view. Marx said that 'Philosophers have interpreted the world. The point is to change it.' So Marx himself did not share the same concern about being value-free and on the contrary wished to join in the world of action.

Other sociologists see a place for **values** in sociology and a place for the sociologist in the making of social policy. Robert S. Lynd (1939) does not quite go this far but he does argue that values are relevant in the choosing of an important social problem and in the guiding of policy makers on the likely outcome of their decisions. C. Wright Mills (1959), too, against the trend of contemporary American sociologists, took an anti-technician stance and argued for the place of values in sociological research. Howard Becker, the interactionist (1967), argues not only for the place of values in sociology but for a particular set of values which promote a favourable outcome in social policy terms for disadvantaged members of society. This position is one shared by many European left-wing sociologists such as Peter Townsend, Stuart Hall and Jeremy Seabrook.

Undertaking research

Of course the underdogs in society are not in much of a position to initiate social policy research themselves. Indeed much social policy research is carried out for various interested parties. These include:

- government – both national and local, who may want to try out ideas on a small scale before applying new social policies;
- government – both national and local, who wish to assess the impact of existing social policy;
- business interests – wishing to develop market research into present and future lifestyles;
- business interests – wishing to develop raw data which support a particular lobbying position that promotes their interests, e.g. Adam Smith Institute;
- promotional interest groups – wishing to influence government, public opinion, or gain media time, e.g. Friends of the Earth;
- sectional interest groups – establishing the effects of current or future social policy on a particular social group, e.g. trade union support of the Low Pay Unit or Child Poverty Action Group;
- independent researchers – rarely.

Results

One argument that seems to present itself here is that social policy research does not necessarily reduce conflict between interested parties and produce social laws as Comte might have hoped, but such research may make the conflicting interest groups better informed – if the information is freely available.

Social policy and power

On the relationship between social policy research and power there are of course different positions. Some sociologists have argued that the increased knowledge gained will enable those with power to strengthen their hold by manipulating their subjects. The increased information may help those in power to respond to public wishes and remain in power. Alternatively policy research may undermine those in authority by revealing the gap between their claims and the actual outcome of their policies. However, in order for this to be the case such policy results would have to be placed in a context where they could be published and utilised by alternative decision makers.

Social policy has different and competing goals. There are also different means of achieving the same policy goal. Sociology has had an uneasy relationship with social policy. This was seen in Comte's

conservatism, the attempt to disassociate sociology from social problems and the controversy over values. Conflicting interests sponsor research. The effects of research on those in authority are uncertain, as are the uses to which research is put.

Questions

- 1 What is meant by the term 'social policy'?
 - 2 What are the differences between sociology and social policy?
 - 3 Is there likely to be a link between the findings and recommendations of a piece of research and the agency funding it?
-

Sociology and science

In the early nineteenth century the French mathematician, Auguste Comte (1798–1857), impressed by the achievements being made in natural sciences such as physics, chemistry and geology, argued that there were three discernible stages in the evolution of human thought. The first stage, which he called the 'theological' or 'fictitious' stage, explained events as God's work, for example thunder occurring when God is angry, or famines being the result of not worshipping him enough. The second stage was characteristic of the middle ages with explanations involving subtle emissions from the divine and mystic influences. He called this the 'metaphysical' stage. The third stage was based on the evidence of the previous two hundred years which appeared to demonstrate that the natural world is subject to the rule of definite laws that can be observed through experiment and the collection of 'positive facts'.

His boldest assertion was to take this one stage further and state that the systematic collection of facts and the search for laws should not be limited to the natural world. Everything, even human society, obeys laws of behaviour. He foresaw a new science of society which would discover these laws and become the 'queen' of all science. In anticipation he called this as yet unresearched science 'sociology'. When all human thought was based on science then the positive stage would be complete.

Many sociologists are unhappy with the idea that the work of writers such as Marx and Durkheim can be called positivist in any meaningful way. They point to studies such as Durkheim's *Suicide* (1897), which argues that the real cause of suicide is not religion, the family or the contemporary political situation but something

unmeasurable – the extent of integration and moral regulation in society. Strictly speaking, then, **positivism** in sociology corresponds to the narrow definition of science as quantifiable, generalisable and concerned to identify clearly observable causes and correlations. Theorists such as Marx and Durkheim were working towards a broader view of this scientific project.

Positivist and structural sociology

Positivism is one of the key concepts in social science. Unhelpfully, it is used differently in subjects such as law ('positive' law), economics ('positive' economics) and sociology. In sociology, positivist sociology and structural (or 'realist') sociology are often thought of as the same thing.

Positivist sociology is similar to the concept of **empiricism**. It is mainly interested in pursuing a research programme that is parallel to that of the natural sciences, seeking to discover patterned and regular events in the social world whose occurrence is either caused by another event, or strongly correlated with that event. A social mechanism may be clearly identified and measured, for example the relation between attendance at parents' evenings and the educational attainment of the children.

Structural sociology is thought to be concerned with the cause of events at such a deep level that they may not be observable in a simple way so that it is not possible to say that one event causes another to happen. Causes exist in the structure of power and social relations. Society is not made up of a simple series of mechanisms as a complex machine is. Empirical research therefore becomes much more difficult.

However, the idea of formulating a science of society was attractive to many, and by the mid-nineteenth century writers were beginning to claim this status for their social theories. Marx, for example, in outlining **historical materialism**, describes 'the material transformation of the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science'. He contrasted his own view of how socialism would emerge from capitalism with that of others, claiming that his view was scientific and theirs merely utopian. They might wish it to happen, but he could identify how it was written into the laws of historical development. By the turn of the century Durkheim could show that suicide in society could be understood through the collection of '**social facts**' and the identification of external variables determining human behaviour. His contemporary, Weber, though, had profound

reservations about the search for general social laws, believing each society to be a unique formation. He also wrestled with the problem of **determinism**, suggesting instead that humans have some control over their lives.

Although a 'positivist' sociology clearly now exists, scepticism exists both inside and outside sociology as to how successful and valid it is. Social science has not achieved anything like the degree of unanimity, certainty or ability to predict of the natural sciences. Its methods are nothing like as rigorous. It cannot, for example, use laboratory experiments in the same way to derive its data. Aside from the ethical problems of placing people in artificial situations, it only makes sense to study people's behaviour in an existing social setting. The closest sociologists can get to orthodox scientific methods is to use field experiments – for example gauging reactions by posing as old when you're young, or black when you're white – or by making comparisons between different groups, societies and cultures (the comparative method). These, of course, are difficult to repeat or have other researchers verify. With these limitations, social scientists have far greater difficulty in establishing the cause or causes of events. At best, all that can be established are strong **correlations**. It lacks the precision of natural science.

Sociologists have responded to these criticisms in a number of ways. From a positivist point of view, while many of the above criticisms are accepted, the argument remains that what most sociologists do is, nevertheless, scientific in that sociology constitutes a body of organised knowledge developed through systematic enquiry, using techniques that approximate to those of natural science, yielding data of similar **reliability** and **validity**.

The hypothetico-deductive method

Many scientists would argue that good science is based on the **hypothetico-deductive method**, which proceeds through the following stages:

- *Observation*: All scientific activity depends on systematic observation, recording and description of its subject matter.
- *Conjecture*: In order to explain any given observation scientists must think up a plausible reason for its occurrence.
- *Hypothesis formation*: The conjecture must be 'operationalised', in other words it must be put in a form that will allow the scientist to determine how well it explains the occurrence of the observation.

At this stage, an attempt is made to predict the result of a test.

- *Testing*: The **hypothesis** must be rigorously tested under controlled conditions through an experiment to show whether it can be proved wrong or not.
- *Generalisation*: If the hypothesis has not been proved wrong by the test, it shows that the conjecture explains the occurrence of the observation. It can then be generalised, either into a law-like statement (for example, light rays bend at an angle dependent on the density of the medium they enter) or a probabilistic statement (for example, there is a 70 per cent probability that x will occur when y is also present under conditions z).
- *Theory formation*: A number of generalisations are ordered into a coherent model or theory, which explains a given range of phenomena.

The hypothetico-deductive method further requires that the researcher be totally neutral at all times, and in no way allow their own views or prejudices to colour any aspect of the research programme. If they don't remain objective but become **subjective**, then their work ceases to be scientific and becomes corrupted and distorted.

The realist approach

An altogether different view of science has emerged from what has been termed the 'realist' school. This argues that it is misleading to typify science as being based on experiment and that, outside the laboratory, scientists are faced with as many uncontrollable variables as social scientists. Although men have landed on the moon with great scientific precision, meteorologists, with banks of technical equipment, cannot tell you with certainty whether it will rain or not in a month or even a day's time, or for how long. Nor is it the case that scientists work solely on the basis of observation. They cannot see viruses spreading from human to human or continents drifting apart, but they are able to surmise these facts from the evidence of epidemics striking people down, or from earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The real causes are often knowable only by their effects. This, the realists claim, allows social scientists to claim that they, too, are engaged in the same scientific project where many and complex variables are at work.

The phenomenological approach

Phenomenologists regard the question of the relationship between sociology and science with great

scepticism. Whatever the claims of natural science, there is a crucial difference between people and inanimate objects in that humans think for themselves and have reasons for their behaviour. This, in turn, enables them to make active sense of their world. Sociologists should be concerned with interpreting this view. Whether social causation exists or not is irrelevant.

Scientists themselves, from the phenomenological point of view, are as involved in interpreting reality as any other group in society. All knowledge is simply the product of interaction between human beings. It is more valid – as well as more interesting – to analyse science as a set of subjectively held meanings. Events are not passively observed. To understand anything, whether tribal life in the South Pacific or the messages across VDUs sent by radio telescopes, a theoretical framework has to be imposed on what is observed. Forming this framework is a creative process, derived from ideas of what is thought to be already there. All knowledge is socially constructed.

There are at least three positions, then, on the debate about the scientific status of science. Positivist sociologists claim that the methods they use, while not identical to those of the natural sciences, approximate closely enough to them. Social science can be like natural science. The realists claim that in both branches of science, similar problems are faced in postulating the influence of unseeable structures and forces. For phenomenologists, the search for causes and laws is dismissed and science itself is studied as a social construct.

Questions

- 1 What differences are there between natural and social science?
 - 2 What is the realist view of science?
 - 3 What does it mean to say that knowledge is socially constructed?
-

Is science scientific?

While there has been considerable pressure on sociologists to consider what they mean by their use of the word 'science', the use of this word by natural scientists has also come under the microscope. What does it mean to call their work scientific? Are they any more objective, rigorous or closer to 'the truth' than social scientists? Even if objectivity is possible, should these scientists want to claim detachment from the objects they study?

At first sight, it seems easy enough to assume that what natural scientists do is to systematically record observations of the patterns of behaviour and movement of matter, without preconceptions of what they might find. As many philosophers of science have pointed out though, the process is more complex – and less objective – than it first appears.

Popper

The very idea of deriving conclusions from the process of making observations is itself problematic. Although 999 white swans may have been observed floating past a point on a river, it is a logical mistake to assume that the next swan to swim past will also be white. This is what Karl Popper (1963) identifies as the problem of **induction**. It cannot be assumed that what has always happened in the past will always happen in the future. It follows, for Popper, that collecting more and more data about an event will not prove a proposition to be true, as there is no reason why past events should predict the future. The black swan of scientific data may well be around the corner, waiting to drift into view.

Instead, Popper argues that scientists should proceed by looking, not for the proof of their hypotheses, but for their disproof. Although it cannot be proved that something is true – only that something has always happened that way in the past – the best evidence will be that it has not yet been disproved or 'falsified'. Science must abandon the inductive method of attempting to make theories fit facts and adopt a deductive method where facts are only admitted into a theory through the process of falsification.

Kuhn

In one of the most important books on this subject, Thomas Kuhn (1962) asks whether scientists do indeed allow the possibility of their theories being falsified, and examines how new scientific theories emerge. According to Kuhn, scientists work not as individuals but as part of a community. Within this scientific community a consensus exists about the nature of the world they are investigating. Kuhn calls the theoretical framework that results from this consensus a **paradigm**. For long periods of time the scientific community engages in activity designed to bear out the validity of this paradigm. Kuhn calls this a time of 'normal science'. Eventually, though, individuals or groups working outside the dominant paradigm will put forward alternative theories that

can be supported by equally valid evidence. They will have to be outside of the dominant paradigm to do this. There then follows a period of revolutionary or 'multi-paradigmatic' science where the rival paradigms struggle for supremacy, and advocates of alternative theoretical frameworks are overthrown or beaten off.

An example of what Kuhn had in mind would be the challenge mounted against Newtonian physics by Albert Einstein in the early part of the twentieth century, where intense battles were unsuccessfully waged by the 'normal' scientists to maintain scientific orthodoxy. If long-standing paradigms can be overthrown, then the defeated scientists have to admit that the theories they were working with were not so much 'true' as merely 'very useful' in helping them make sense of the data they had gathered.

It is not the case, then, that those who are working within paradigms of normal science approach what they examine with open minds, or are prepared to look anew each time at what they are observing. Some commentators have argued that the problem is more deep-set than this, in that all scientists, by definition, start off with the unfalsifiable assumption that every event has a cause. Furthermore, from the realist point of view, not every event – or every possible cause – is observable or knowable. The study of plate tectonics and earthquakes by geologists, for example, requires a series of guesses to be made about what is probably happening in the earth's structure. The problem of causation, of identifying specific causes, is as much of a problem for natural scientists as it is for social scientists.

In the same vein, it is no less true to say that, although the subject of natural scientific study may be inanimate or non-human, scientists themselves are human beings who have to impose a structure on what they see in order to make sense of it and they have to select some facts from others to put a theory together. In this way, scientists are as prone to imposing their own subjective views of the world as any other humans. That they need to choose to prioritise some data means that they are making value judgements about which data is most helpful to test their hypothesis. When they start making choices about the status of facts, then they have, strictly speaking, ceased to be objective. Facts have become values.

Questions have been asked not only about the methodology of the natural sciences but also their ethics. Radical and feminist critics have brought into the debate not only the methodology of science but

the knowledge that the application of this methodology produces.

Medawar

Medawar (1985) has argued that the real sequence of scientific research is inspiration then observation *not* observation then inspiration as implied by the hypothetico-deductive method. Normal science consists of problem solving with the results anticipated because they will fit into the existing jigsaw. As the data is collected it impinges on a mind already anticipating it.

What Medawar is suggesting is that the actual process of research may follow no logical pattern but this reality is hidden from the public, because scientific papers omit false starts, changes in direction and dead ends.

Some scientific evidence has been found to be fallacious. Lynch (1993) studied the work of scientists who were carrying out laboratory investigations into the brain functioning of rats. He found that the types of feature they were looking for and expected to find influenced many of their conclusions. In other words, they were using the data they collected to confirm their theories, rather than keeping an open mind and seeking to test their ideas objectively.

'Big' science

Sociologists have argued that scientific knowledge in the natural world arises from an objective and independent search for truth and also from the priorities and values of those who have funded the research. For Leslie Sklair (1973), what most people think of as scientific knowledge is better thought of as 'big' science – research undertaken to further the control and interests of the military-industrial state over its people. Examples of this would include research into space and weapons technology, or business-led research into systems whose sole aim is profit-maximisation. The resulting popular image is of scientists as men in white coats, developing large-scale and impersonal structures on multi-billion pound projects without regard for how their creations will be used. Their technology is thought to be part of an objective science because of the power and prestige of those who fund them. Their concerns are thought to be our concerns.

Science and ideology

Feyerabend (1998) argues that scientists have no special method and that they frequently change what they are doing and the approach used. He suggests

that science is basically an ideology completely shaped at any moment in time by its historical and cultural context. Despite scientists' claims to the contrary, the rule in science is that anything goes.

Support for this view comes from Gomm's study of Darwin's theory of evolution. Roger Gomm (1982) argues that Darwin's views about evolution and natural selection were poorly supported by the available evidence and in some respects were clearly not true. Nevertheless, Darwin's ideas gained widespread support in the nineteenth century because they fitted closely with the ideologies of dominant social groups in Britain. For example, the idea of 'survival of the fittest' and 'natural selection' could be used to justify the free-market capitalist system and the harsh treatment of the poor.

Feminism

For feminists, science is a male world from which women have always been excluded. Scientific achievements and scientific knowledge reveal only male priorities in which nature, always characterised as female, has to be brought under control. Areas of traditionally female knowledge of previous centuries such as healing and midwifery have become the brutal male domains of medicine and obstetrics. For Hilary Rose (1982), it is male science that has brought about 'the mechanisation of childbirth through routine induction, massive pollution of the environment and the ultimate terror of nuclear holocaust', as well as forms of contraception based on controlling women's – rather than men's – fertility.

Male science is not objective if objectivity is thought only to concern how scientific research is done, and not the reason why that research came into existence, or what the social consequences are. Sandra Harding (1987) states that 'Defining what is in need of scientific explanation only from the perspective of bourgeois, white men's experiences leads to partial and even perverse understandings ... an androcentric [male-centred] picture of nature and social life emerges from the testing by men of hypotheses generated by what men find problematic in the world around them.' It was, after all, this very same male-centred science that claimed to have 'proved' that women were biologically and socially inferior to men. Furthermore, it is men alone who have produced the technology to make chemical and nuclear weapons.

If women are to enter the exclusive world of male science then, feminists have argued, science must be reconceptualised and made more humane. Scientists

themselves have to become accountable for their actions. Technology will be seen not as 'value-free' but assessed in terms of the impact it has in bringing about meaningful change in social relations. Men, as well as women, would be seen as capable of reproduction. Given that scientific advance has relied as much on inspired guesses as its own methodology, a feminist perspective would reintroduce and relegitimise the intuitive approach. In this way science will become a means of enhancing human freedom rather than being a threat to survival as at present. What has been a defensive and conservative discipline will become healthy and liberatory.

It can be argued, then, that there are a number of ways in which the supposed objectivity of science can be questioned, to such an extent that belief in objectivity in science – within and without the scientific world – is now crumbling. If this is the case, then it begs the question of the status of sociology as a social science, conceived specifically to emulate the achievements and aspirations of natural science.

Questions

- 1 What does Kuhn mean by 'paradigms' in science?
 - 2 How do feminists view science?
 - 3 What is the 'inductive method'?
-

Values and sociologists

One of Max Weber's main aims in setting up the German Society for Sociology was to establish sociology as a discipline free from value judgements. What he meant by this was clear from the society's statute, which demanded the advancement of sociology as a science, giving equal space to all directions and methods in sociology, without at the same time advancing any specific religious, political or ethical goals.

Weber

In this aim he has been frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted. He did not mean that sociologists could not be politically active, that they should not hold opinions about the worth or relevance of their work or that they should not be interested in the values and opinions of the people they studied. What he really wanted was for sociologists to recognise that facts and values are separate phenomena. 'These two things are logically different and to deal with them as though they were the same represents a confusion of

entirely heterogeneous problems.' Weber believed that sociologists should propagate facts, not values, although he knew it was not easy to recognise where the line between the two should be drawn.

Nevertheless, Weber argued that values in sociology are important in that they help guide sociologists towards relevant areas of research. These will be decided by what are seen as the dominant cultural problems of the age, and will change over time. In this, he anticipates the possibility of paradigmatic change in all forms of science. Value freedom, however, is not the same as objectivity. Values concern the choice of subjects studied; objectivity refers to the collection of data without bias or prejudice. Yet objectivity is only possible within a framework of values.

Sociologists need to recognise that the choice of studying ethnic minorities in education rather than girls in education; working-class rather than middle-class **deviance**; or dependence on the Welfare State rather than the distribution of wealth is an evaluative one. Clearly, some choices are affected by the researcher's own values. What Weber was concerned with was that these values should be recognised and clearly stated. Only then can data be gathered and conclusions reached in an objective way. If values still influence the process then the researcher is guilty of making 'value judgements' and the status of the resulting research must be called into question. Often the 'facts' which a sociologist unearths are picked out because they suit his or her values, while other, perhaps equally relevant, 'facts' are ignored. Facts are often established because they fit in with an underpinning theory.

Functionalism

For Alvin Gouldner (1970), the functionalism of Parsons and Merton is a good example of misunderstanding Weber. What these writers have done is claim a value-free status for their work, projecting an image of political and ideological neutrality. They saw their work as above politics and non-partisan and, to that extent, as value-free. This can be construed as a form of intellectual dishonesty: the truth is that it is a conservative ideology presented as social science, believing in the inherent harmony and stability of the status quo. Hiding this confuses objectivity with value freedom.

At the other extreme are the openly partisan sociologists, for example Howard Becker and many Marxists and feminists. In Becker's work (1967 and 1973), values dominate the choice of which social

phenomena are studied. Scientific and moral questions are inseparable. Some people may want to disguise their morals as science, because it gives their moral stance greater weight. Instead he suggests that those opposed to the status quo 'whose sympathies I share, should attack injustice and oppression directly and openly, rather than pretend that the judgement that such things are evil is somehow deducible from sociological first principles, or warranted by empirical findings alone ... we sometimes begin with the actions we want to take and the people we want to help, as a basis for choosing problems and methods'. This does not necessarily mean to say that how something is studied is lacking in objectivity, even if values determine which social phenomena are studied.

An example given by Becker is the disproportionate amount of research into juvenile behaviour and crime which is conducted. According to Becker, most researchers begin by asking 'what is wrong with the kids of today?' This shows an immediate bias towards the status quo, reflecting the views of the police, parents and social workers. Resulting explanations, if allowed to masquerade as value-free science, take on the status of 'truth'. This could be to the detriment of those involved, particularly the young. Openly partisan, Becker sympathises with the underdog, suggesting that it would be equally valid to ask the question 'what is wrong with the parents of today?'

Marxism

A similar campaigning thrust exists among Marxists, taking their cue from Karl Marx's statement (1845): 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it.' Marxism is openly value-laden in its examination of social dynamics, being anti-capitalist and pro-communist, although Marxists nevertheless believe that their depiction of reality is objective and scientific: the progression from **capitalism** to **communism** is inevitable.

Feminism

Likewise with feminism, which criticises existing sociology for reflecting male values and male methods. Explicitly feminist knowledge, it has been claimed (Harding, 1987), 'emerges for the oppressed only through the struggles they wage against their oppressors. It is through feminist struggles against male domination that women's experience can be made to yield up a truer (or less false) image of a social reality than that available only from the perspective of the

social experience of the ruling class races. Thus a feminist standpoint is not something anyone can have by claiming it, but an achievement. (A standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective).'

Ann Oakley (1981) argues that feminism demands a particular rationale of research, which breaks down patriarchal approaches by seeing respondents as equals, to whom information is divulged by the researcher as willingly as it is given by the respondent. Feminist theory therefore has a built-in inclination towards qualitative methods.

The problem of objectivity and value freedom is unlikely to be easily solved. Because sociology is the study of humans by other humans, the problem of consciousness and selective perception will always be present. Whether this jeopardises the possibility of a 'scientific' status for sociology depends on how both sociology and science are defined.

Post-modernism

Post-modernist theorists argue that language is value laden, and social phenomena cannot really be defined in a value-free way. For example, knowing what to include in a study of the sociology of art depends on a value judgement as to what constitutes, or does not constitute, art. A similar problem is encountered in the study of poverty. Shipman (1981) argues that values are implicit in the selection and use of established evidence, a body of work which constitutes what he terms 'the mythodology of the subject'. Some studies are frequently mentioned yet the evidence on which they are based is frail. Shipman gives the example of the Hawthorne experiments of the 1930s, which examined the importance of human relations in the workplace. He argues that the superiority of good human relations in the workplace over good material conditions and financial regard does not seem justified by the results of the experiment, but it was a 'comfortable' conclusion to draw. This is ultimately because of the support that it gave to other values in our culture.

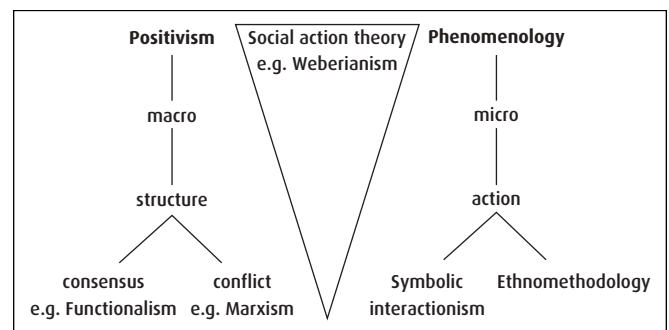
Questions

- You have read the section on sociology and values. Now try to define the following terms:
 - objectivity
 - subjectivity
 - value freedom
 - ideology
 - patriarchy
- Are sociological perspectives value free or should they be viewed as ideologies?

Sociological perspectives

Most sociology textbooks, this one included, present sociology as a divided discipline, with a marked cleavage between two philosophical traditions. Figure 1.1 reflects the commonly accepted structure of sociological perspectives.

Figure 1.1



Positivism and phenomenology

Positivism and **phenomenology** are the philosophical roots or traditions from which the main perspectives in sociology have evolved. Positivism, a term first brought into use by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), holds that all knowledge can be based on science and scientific thought, and that all behaviour, whether of objects or of people, is subject to general laws. The possibility of identifying these laws inspired a generation of mid-to-late nineteenth-century theorists in many areas of knowledge, although the extent of its influence on writers such as Marx and Durkheim remains under dispute.

The term phenomenology is most closely associated with Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), and in sociology with Alfred Schutz (1899–1959). In this tradition the belief is that positivism's search for social causes is illusory, falling into the trap of determinism. Phenomenology denies that social behaviour, like the movement of atoms and molecules, is determined by external forces which are beyond human control. All that can realistically be achieved is an understanding of how people, individually and collectively, interpret, understand and place meaning on their social reality. Phenomenologists assert that people possess a greater degree of **free will** than positivist sociologists are willing to admit.

Structure and action

The debate between the two camps of sociology can also be seen as one between the concepts of structure and action. For the structuralists, sociology should be the study of the effects of the structure of society on social life – the macro or large-scale view. Patterns

created by structures such as religion, the family, organisations or, for Marxists, capitalist relations of production, are seen to be the starting point in explaining anything in society. The analysis begins at a structural level. Hence some may argue that an increase in unemployment can lead to an increase in the crime rate, or that social disintegration is the cause of suicide. 'Social facts' exist as definite realities.

Other sociologists, taking the micro or small-scale view, doubt the validity of this position. The idea of a social structure is an abstract one, assuming a world 'out there' for us to investigate. The truth is that we are already in that world, with each of us having very different assumptions of what it looks like. They argue that the search for structural clues to social causes and effects should be abandoned in favour of piecing together the way individuals and groups make sense of the world they live in. This involves the analysis of social action, not the intangible structures they are thought to inhabit. 'Social facts' do not exist but are created and constructed in the process of social interaction.

These two approaches can be compared to a telescope. One end will show everything in enlarged form and in great detail (the microview), the other will display a world that is small and distant (the macroview). Both are 'true' pictures of the same thing. In sociology, there is no agreement about which approach is best or how the two can be made compatible.

Marxism and functionalism

Marxism and functionalism are seen as two perspectives both of which look at how the structure of society determines behaviour.

Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology

Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology are presented as perspectives emphasising small-scale understanding of how groups and individuals structure their perception of action and meaning in society. These perspectives are often referred to collectively as **interpretive sociology**. Somewhere in between the two is the tradition emanating from Max Weber, which explores the possibility of uniting theories of structure and action in society.

This view of sociology is certainly common. A typical exam question, implicitly or explicitly, amounts to 'Compare and contrast Marxist and interactionist views of sociology', and most textbooks are written to cater for this demand.

Whether intended or not, the end result is an intellectual condition known as 'perspectivitis', whose main symptoms are the obsessive need to label a piece of sociological research positivist or phenomenological, Marxist, functionalist or Weberian, interactionist or ethnomethodological. The truth is, however, that such simplistic labelling can be misleading.

'Good' sociology

While it is certainly true to say that clearly discernible sociological traditions of thought do exist, very few writers begin their sociological research solely in order to contribute to the body of knowledge of a given perspective. What they are principally trying to create is 'good' sociology, attempting to answer the question: 'How much can we reliably and validly know about human societies?' If they find that the best way to do this is by drawing on the theoretical assumptions and methodological techniques of the dominant sociological traditions, then so be it. There is no reason, as Paul Willis (1977) found, why someone using observation techniques, typical of the interactionist perspective, should not come to conclusions informed by Marxism. Similarly, feminism draws from all perspectives, while at the same time being both critical and sceptical of the inherent male bias in sociological theory and research to date.

Questions

- 1 You have looked at a discussion of sociological perspectives. Now try to define the following terms:
 - (a) a sociological perspective
 - (b) positivism
 - (c) phenomenology
 - 2 What is meant by 'structure' and 'action' in sociology?
-

Functionalism

No one has ever seen a society. All they can ever see is small parts at work at different times in different places. The nearest anyone could come would be to observe a small community, preferably with what seems to be a simple way of going about their everyday life. It should then be possible to work out what the importance of the things these people do is to the way their community works. Some anthropologists, who themselves come from industrial societies, have undertaken studies of pre-industrial societies still in existence. Among the best known is A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). A central part of the way he

observed these pre-industrial societies was his belief that social activity, if it was recurrent, must be functional to the working of that community. In other words, an observable pattern of group activity must help maintain the life of that community: it must have a function. If, for example, a group of people are regularly observed sitting around smoking pipes communally, this activity may function to bind together or integrate the group as a community and reinforce the values of friendliness and co-operation. If the men taking part in this activity are elderly then it may be one way of maintaining their social power, and a respect for age.

In this way, a wider picture of how society works can be built up. Like many sociologists before him, Radcliffe-Brown made great use of what is called the organic analogy in his examination of the way societies work, though this idea really comes from Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and was also used by Emile Durkheim.

EMILE DURKHEIM (1858–1917)



French sociologist who did much to establish sociology as a discipline, particularly with works such as *Suicide* (1897). He emphasised the importance of examining society as a whole and the role of the 'collective conscience'. He strongly influenced the work of Talcott Parsons and the development of American structural functionalism.

The organic analogy

The idea behind the organic analogy is that societies can be compared to the way a biological organism works. Someone who had no idea how the body works might find, from slicing a human apart, that there were various organs inside that make humans work. The heart functions to pump blood around the veins and arteries, the kidneys clean the blood, the intestines are

involved in digestion and so on. Each organ has a function which contributes to the working of the greater whole. So too with society, where the organs might be the family, education, the system of religion, work, etc. Any examination of these institutions should begin by asking the question: 'What does it do to help the wider society function?' Homeostasis is the term applied to the way in which an organism regulates itself to cope with changes in internal and external conditions. For example, after exercise, the heated-up body sweats to help the body temperature to stay stable. When this concept is used to understand how equilibrium is maintained in society, then the organic analogy becomes more effective.

The analogy also has many limits, however. It is difficult, for example, to compare the way organisms grow to the way societies grow and change. Is there a social equivalent to DNA, the genetic programme present in every species? Does a society really have a series of complementary institutions which work together to make the whole function smoothly to the mutual benefit of all? In the same way that the skin holds a human body together, so too do **norms** and values bind society together. But does this help us understand who determines the norms and values by which we live and how the wider society is organised?

Another way of looking at society is to compare it to a mechanism in the way it works, where all the small parts, such as in a clockwork watch, function together to achieve the aim of demonstrating the time of day. Similarly, when people pull together in society, they can achieve collectively held goals such as improvement in the overall standard of living.

Parsonian functionalism

This is close to Talcott Parsons' (1902–79) view of the way society functions, and in the 1950s and 1960s Parsonian functionalism was virtually the dominant paradigm in sociology. The model of society he put forward has been subsequently heavily criticised, but it is important to understand how his model of society worked in order to understand the criticisms.

Parsons argues that any society has four functional needs or prerequisites that need to be met for it to survive: these are adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency (AGIL). It is hard to believe now that sociologists were excited by the bland and fruitless way that Parsons went about examining society, but many US college students went into their exams with the four letters AGIL stuck in their heads (or on the palms of their hands).

TALCOTT PARSONS (1902–79)

American sociological theorist and leader of the functionalist school that dominated American sociology from the 1940s to the 1960s. In his famous work *The Social System* (1951) Parsons tried to show how consensus based on shared values is essential to social order. The stratification system is crucial in maintaining consensus in society.

They then would have given Parsons' view that, firstly, all societies must have ways of adapting to change, whatever that change might be (A); they must have social aims that everyone wants which help the society determine the direction it's going in (G); they must have ways of binding their members together to identify with and realise these collective goals whether through religion or newspapers or marriage or whatever (I); and there must be a way in which a society's way of living can survive through generations of people (L). This scheme can be found detailed in works of his such as *The Social System* (1951). People born within this system are socialised into it and come to take on the roles the system demands: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Manifest and latent functions

One of the key additions to Parsons' structural-functionalism has been made by his American contemporary, Robert Merton (born 1910). This is the distinction between manifest and latent functions. A **manifest function** is evident when an institution achieves the goal it clearly intended, for example the way a family socialises its young. A **latent function** would be an unintended consequence of an aspect in society. No one commits a crime with the deliberate intention of revealing the boundaries of normative behaviour to the rest of society! Nevertheless, a latent function of their criminal behaviour is to demonstrate the limits of socially acceptable behaviour.

Criticisms of functionalism

One of the most frequent criticisms of the functionalist perspective is of a logical problem it embraces: if something in society is recurrent, functionalists say that it must be meeting a need. But how do we know that this need exists? Because of the phenomenon that we observe! It exists because it exists; it is because it is. In philosophy, this type of going-nowhere argument is known as a tautology.

Secondly, because it focuses on the way in which different members of society integrate and work in harmony around a value consensus, functionalism lacks any real power to explain social change. One concept that attempts to overcome this is Merton's use of the concept of dysfunction: the way in which some aspects of society work against its overall harmony and consensus. Functionalism leans heavily towards describing society in a stable condition, and seems to emphasise the status quo: inequality is inevitable; poverty is inevitable; the media reflect all views; women are domestically orientated; marriages are happy. Functionalists such as Parsons and Merton appear to be using their own middle-class, middle-American view of the world and saying this is what society is like.

Functionalism should not be dismissed too quickly, however. Functionalists argue that advanced industrial societies are stable: people do seem to have faith in their political system in a democracy; industrial conflict is diminishing; and the major political parties are competing for the same middle ground. It is not difficult even now to make a strong case for arguing that a value consensus exists in advanced societies.

Question

You have now looked at an introduction to functionalism. Try to define the following terms:

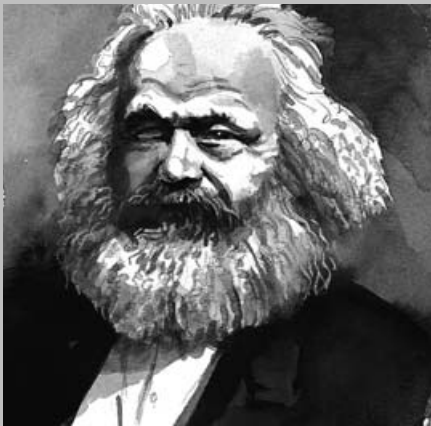
- the organic analogy
- functional needs
- the mechanical analogy
- a manifest function
- dysfunction

Marxism

At first sight, Marxism seems difficult to understand. It seems to use more new words and phrases than any other perspective in sociology. This is not because Marx was being awkward, but because of the richly creative nature of his thought. He needed a number of new terms to describe his ideas.

Marx's historical materialism

Marx did not want to simply analyse the world; he wanted to play a part in changing it. His life's work was devoted to understanding the way in which modern industrial societies change. Marx's theory is sometimes described as 'historical materialism'. The

KARL MARX (1818–83)

German-born economist, sociologist, philosopher and revolutionary. Spent most of his life in poverty in London, financed by his friend, Friedrich Engels. Developed the theory of historical progression to communism through class struggle (historical materialism). His best-known works are *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Capital* (1867).

term materialism is often used to describe the acquisition of consumer goods (consumerism) but in Marx's time materialism meant the opposite of idealism, the belief that the physical world is created by ideas, particularly religious ideas. Marx argued instead that ideas themselves are products of the material struggle for existence in the economic base of society. Historical materialism sees change in society emerging from this struggle.

There are, according to Marx, three main periods of change that have occurred in the way human societies are organised. These periods he calls epochs, which are characterised by the way in which production happens – the **mode of production**. The three main epochs are the classical societies of ancient Rome and Greece, the feudal societies of the Middle Ages, and the one in which he lived (and which interested him most) – capitalist society.

What distinguishes each epoch are the different **relations of production**, determined by who owns the **means of production** – the method of producing the things we need to survive. In a classical society, the relations of production were between slave owner and slave; in **feudal** times they were between the landowner and his serf. In the development from land-based production to factory production, the key relationship became the one between the **bourgeoisie**, who owned the means of production (usually in the form of a factory), and the people

hired by the (bourgeois) capitalists – the new landless **working class** or **proletariat**. According to Marx, it is conflict about ownership of the means of production, that is the class struggle, that causes change in society. In his various writings, Marx projected that this cause of conflict would only come to an end when there was no separate ownership of the means of production. He believed that the new industrial working class would be the class that brought about this change, taking over the means of production from the bourgeoisie. No new classes would be formed in their wake, so the result would eventually be a classless (or communist) society.

The labour theory of value

The bulk of Marx's work in the period from writing *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) to his death was devoted to showing how this transition to communism would come about. The bourgeoisie, he says, is an immensely dynamic and creative class. They were the driving force behind the Industrial Revolution, it was with their capital that mines were dug, roads were built, canals constructed, ships riveted together and steel foundries opened. But the bourgeoisie were only part of the story. Who actually hammered the rivets into the ships, took the pickaxe to the coal-face and shovelled out the earth to make the road? Not the bourgeoisie, but the people who have only their ability to work – labour power – which they sell to the bourgeoisie to make a living – the proletariat. And, Marx asks, what do they get in return? George Orwell put this point very well in his novel *Animal Farm* (1945). Orwell uses the example of the suffering experienced by farm animals as a metaphor for the exploitation and degradation of the proletariat.

'Now, comrades, what is the nature of this life of ours? Let us face it: our lives are miserable, laborious, and short. We are born, we are given just so much food as will keep the breath in our bodies, and those of us who are capable of it are forced to work to the last atom of our strength; and the very instant that our usefulness has come to an end we are slaughtered with hideous cruelty. No animal in England knows the meaning of happiness or leisure after he is a year old. No animal in England is free. The life of an animal is misery and slavery: that is the plain truth.'

'But is this simply part of the order of nature? Is it because this land of ours is so poor that it cannot afford a decent life to those who dwell upon it? No, comrades, a thousand times no! The soil of England is fertile, its climate is good, it is capable of affording food in abundance to an enormously greater number of animals than now inhabit it. This single farm of ours would

support a dozen horses, twenty cows, hundreds of sheep – and all of them living in a comfort and a dignity that are now almost beyond our imagining. Why then do we continue in this miserable condition? Because nearly the whole of the produce of our labour is stolen from us by human beings. There, comrades, is the answer to all our problems. It is summed up in a single word – Man. Man is the only real enemy we have. Remove Man from the scene, and the root cause of hunger and overwork is abolished for ever.

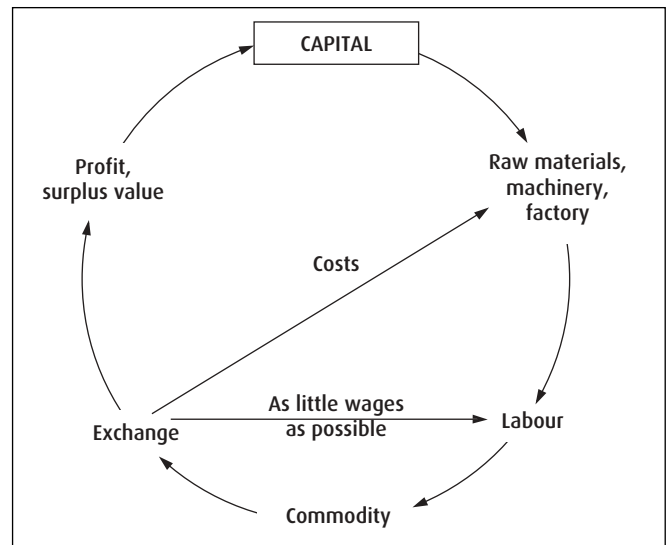
'Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals. He sets them to work, he gives back to them the bare minimum that will prevent them from starving, and the rest he keeps for himself. Our labour tills the soil, our dung fertilizes it, and yet there is not one of us that owns more than his bare skin. You cows that I see before me, how many thousands of gallons of milk have you given during the last year? And what has happened to that milk which should have been breeding up sturdy calves? Every drop of it has gone down the throats of our enemies. And you hens, how many eggs have you laid this year, and how many of those eggs ever hatched into chickens?'

Major's speech from Animal Farm by George Orwell.

Profit and surplus value

The owner of capital wants to invest this money in order to make more capital. This is done by first buying the raw materials, machines and tools necessary for the manufacture of goods. Let us say that the capitalist believes that wooden chairs will be a good source of potential profit. They therefore buy the necessary wood, lathe machines, chisels etc. for their chair factory. Labour is taken on for the production of the commodity (anything which is bought and sold), in this case chairs. Once the chairs are sold the capitalist has a lot of money but now needs to pay for the machinery, raw materials and any other overheads, principally wages. How much should the proletariat be paid? The capitalist is only in business for one reason – to make as much profit (which Marx calls **surplus value**) as possible. The workers will therefore be paid as little as the capitalist can get away with. But who actually turned the raw materials into saleable commodities? The labour of the proletariat is added to the raw material to turn it into a marketable commodity; in return they receive as little payment as possible. It is this difference that Marx calls exploitation. When the true nature of this exploitation becomes realised – when they achieve

Figure 1.2 The cycle of capital



class consciousness – the proletariat will become revolutionary and overthrow the exploitative bourgeoisie. Another way of understanding the Marxist concept of exploitation is to consider the situation of builders who spend their lives building houses but may never be able to own one themselves.

Although the meaning of the terms 'profit' and 'surplus value' is close, Marx does not use them interchangeably. When workers add value to things and turn them into commodities, what they are adding is their labour-time. The amount of labour-time – 'necessary labour' – put in to earn their wages is not the same as their total output. The labour-time remaining is called 'surplus labour', in which time the worker will create 'surplus value'. It is in this time that the worker will be reproducing capital for the capitalist. 'What appears as surplus value on capital's side appears identically on the workers' side as surplus labour in excess of his requirements as a worker, hence in excess of his immediate requirements for keeping himself alive' (Karl Marx, *Outlines of Political Economy*, 1857/8, more commonly known as the *Grundrisse*). Without surplus value produced in this way by extra unpaid labour-time there can be no profit. The rate of profit is not the same as the rate of surplus value, because the concept of profit involves variables such as the total amount of all possible capital used, or the amount of raw materials. The rate of profit is always lower than the narrower concept of the rate of surplus value. This difference was an important element in Marx's view of the labour process in relation to work, automation and unemployment.

Class consciousness

Why the proletariat never achieves revolutionary class consciousness is the central question asked of Marxism, though its supporters point to the closing years of the First and Second World Wars, and the British General Strike of 1926 as examples of heightened class awareness. One answer is because the structure of bourgeois society works continuously in favour of the bourgeoisie. Because they control the most important aspect of society – the means of production – they are able to decisively influence the structure of everything else. This is what is meant by the **economic base** determining the superstructure, which is composed of the other vital aspects of society – the family, religion and the political, educational and judicial systems. As we describe in later chapters, for Marxists all of these institutions serve, in a capitalist society, to maintain bourgeois control.

Marxism after Marx

In the twentieth century, particularly from the 1950s on (when Marxist sociology began to witness a revival in the West), many people have argued that, given the obvious failings of the former Soviet Union, ‘Marxism doesn’t work.’ This point of view was considerably strengthened by the spectacular collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. So is Marxism dead?

Stalinism and the Soviet bloc

There are a number of points to be made here. Firstly, Marx would not have identified the Eastern Bloc countries of 1917–91 as lying beyond capitalism. These societies were, from 1930 on, Stalinist, not Marxist, and many non-Soviet Marxist studies have highlighted this crucial difference.

Although Stalin’s Soviet Union claimed to be Marxist, Stalin’s own ideas and the unique historical and political situation were much more influential than the political and economic theories of Marx. Marx had envisaged a socialist revolution based on class struggle between a rising proletariat and a decadent bourgeoisie in advanced capitalist countries, particularly Germany. This was definitely not the situation in pre-revolutionary Russia, which was a largely peasant-based society, not dissimilar to some of today’s **Third World** countries. The perceived need to ruthlessly accelerate the economies of what became the Eastern Bloc in order to catch up with and

overtake the more developed West meant that Stalinism superseded Marxism. After the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, many Western Marxists finally broke with what they then saw as a grotesque misrepresentation of Marx’s ideas in the Soviet Union. This led to the emergence of the ‘New Left’ and eventually ‘Eurocommunism’.

One of the main criticisms levelled at Marxists since the death of Marx is that it has become a complex and sophisticated excuse for the lack of socialist revolution in advanced industrial nations, as Marx had predicted. Most revolutions carried out in his name have occurred in countries with mainly agricultural economies, such as China, Cuba, Nicaragua and even Ethiopia.

Neo-Marxism is concerned with explaining the reasons for this non-revolution, and concentrates on analysing the use of ideological means of control by the ruling class. Working-class consciousness has been prevented from crystallising in any decisive way by **ideological State apparatuses** such as the media, politics and education.

Marxism has been used by sociologists as a tool of analysis of capitalist societies in the post-war period and has produced remarkably fruitful studies. For these Marxists, nothing has essentially changed the nature of Western capitalism to make these societies less amenable to Marxist analysis; the class structure may have changed slightly, but capital and the bourgeoisie are as much in control as ever (see chapter 3).

The Frankfurt School

Critical theory is an approach to the analysis of society that developed in Germany during the inter-war years and later found a home in the USA. It began as an attempt by Western Marxists to reappraise Marxist theory in the light of contemporary developments such as the rise of fascism and Stalinism, the growth of monopoly capital and the power of the **mass media**. It was centred around the Frankfurt School of critical theory whose members included Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and T. W. Adorno. The Frankfurt School exercised a major influence on radical thinking in the period 1923 to the late 1960s, and it has since enjoyed a revival through the work of the contemporary German sociologist, Jürgen Habermas.

A key feature of critical theory was the emphasis on adopting an interdisciplinary approach combining Marxism with Freudian concepts, philosophy with psychoanalysis, economic research with historical and cultural analyses across a wide range of fields from the

family to the media, the economy to the State. The underlying aim was to liberate the individual in modern society by critically analysing all forms of domination. Critical theory was, thus, in the same tradition as Marx's concept of **alienation** and Durkheim's concept of **anomie**, a cry for the freedom of the individual amid the all-pervasive and stifling forces of **bureaucracy**, technology, the media and the State.

The Frankfurt School identified ideology as a major source of domination in modern societies and sought to show how it conceals and legitimates the power of the ruling class. This was an extension of Marxist analysis, although members of the school were careful to distinguish themselves from traditional Marxism, which they denounced as another ideological force that was undermining the freedom of the individual. They also rejected the crude economic determinism of many earlier Marxist writers and regarded the cultural and ideological aspects of society as having a relative autonomy from the influence of the underlying economic forces.

Habermas

Habermas (1976) argues against the Marxist idea that economic crises will inevitably lead to the overthrow of capitalism. He suggests that in advanced capitalist societies the State has developed mechanisms for coping with economic crises. It has also found means of incorporating the working class in the capitalist system so that at present there is little class consciousness or will to bring about revolutionary change.

Insofar as there is a crisis in advanced capitalist societies, Habermas sees it as a crisis within the realm of ideas and the State rather than within the economy. The State justifies its intervention in the economy on the principles of justice, equality and freedom. It is a **democratic** State that must strive to serve the interests of everyone in society. However, the capitalist economy, which is based on inherently unequal relations between owners and workers, places limits on the extent to which the State can fulfil its commitment to act on behalf of the community as a whole. For example, the principles of justice and equality demand that the State intervene in the economy to combat the problem of unemployment, but as the causes of unemployment are largely beyond the control of the State its policies will inevitably fail or prove less successful than people hoped for. If people's expectations of the State are constantly disappointed, a legitimisation crisis may

result whereby the State finds it difficult to maintain the popular support it requires for it to survive in its present democratic form.

Habermas' analysis of advanced capitalism reflects his general belief that non-material factors such as ideas and language make a fundamental contribution to the structure of society and need to be analysed in their own right rather than reduced to a mere reflection of material forces.

Questions

- 1 You will now be aware of the basic principles of the Marxist perspective. Now try to define the following terms:
 - (a) mode of production
 - (b) forces of production
 - (c) relations of production
 - (d) capitalism
 - (e) class consciousness
 - 2 How does a Marxist explanation of the way a society works differ from the functionalist explanation?
-

Weberianism

Max Weber (1864–1920) is one of the most difficult, but also one of the most important, theorists to come to terms with in sociology. In attempts to 'pigeon-hole' him, no one quite knows where to put him. He was aware that social structures exist and are important, but he was also aware that these structures are, at the same time, made up of individuals, with their own understanding of the meaning of their actions.

Weber and Marx

One of the standard sociological clichés is to say that Weber's work amounts to a 'debate with the ghost of Marx'. This is a phrase which is meant to highlight the similarities as well as differences between the two. Weber was, in part of his work, pointing out an alternative theory to Marx's materialism, but much of his output was concerned with completely different areas of sociology.

One reason for this was that, while Marx was concerned to develop a revolutionary theory for the proletariat and their allies, Weber, as a co-founder of the German Sociological Association, was more interested in establishing sociology as an academic discipline. If Weber's ideas seem hard to grasp it is because Weber was a complex and profound thinker –