Margaret Archer's *Culture and agency* was first published in 1988, and proved a seminal contribution to social theory and the case for the relatively autonomous role of culture in sociological thought. Described in the *Sociological Review* as 'a timely and sophisticated treatment', the book showed that the 'problems' of culture and agency, on the one hand, and structure and agency, on the other, could be solved using the same analytical framework.

In this revised edition of *Culture and agency*, incorporating two new chapters, Margaret Archer contextualises her argument in 1990s cultural sociology and links it explicitly to her latest book, *Realist social theory: the morphogenetic approach* (Cambridge University Press, 1995). A third volume is planned, and, together, they will constitute a major statement on culture and society by one of the world's leading social theorists.

Culture and agency

Revised edition

CULTURE AND AGENCY

The place of culture in social theory

REVISED EDITION

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For my mother Elise
a belated thank you

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Preface

The problem of structure and agency has rightly come to be seen as the basic issue in modern social theory. However, in acquiring this centrality it has completely overshadowed the problem of culture and agency. The main thesis of this book is that in fact the two problems do directly parallel one another: they raise identical difficulties and the method by which these can be resolved turns out to be exactly the same.

Nevertheless the structural and cultural domains are substantively very different, as well as being relatively autonomous from one another. These two considerations have crucial bearings on my main thesis. The first consideration means that the concepts used have both to respect and to capture the substantive differences between structures and culture; otherwise these would simply be clamped together in a conceptual vice, doing violence to our subject matter by eliding the material and the ideational aspects of social life. The second means that theories developed about the relationship between structures and social agents and between cultures and cultural actors have to recognize the relative autonomy of structure and culture. Otherwise we would be violating our ability to understand social life as the interplay between interests and ideas. In short, if these considerations are not acknowledged, then we would not be dealing with two parallel problems but simply collapsing the one into the other.

The problem of structure and agency is now a familiar phrase used to denote central dilemmas in social theory – especially the rival claims of Voluntarism versus Determinism, Subjectivism versus Objectivism, and the micro- versus the macroscopic in sociology.

These issues are central for the simple reason that it is impossible to do sociology at all without dealing with them and coming to some personal decisions about them. When writing, these decisions affect the statements that we advance, and when reading they affect the sentences that we can accept. These issues are problematic for any social theorist who cannot come down with conviction on one side or the other; and that means a great many of us, each of whom is then of necessity in the job of reconciliation. Imperative as this is, the urgency of the problem of structure and agency is not one which imposes itself on academics alone, but on every human being.

For it is part and parcel of daily experience to feel both free and enchained, capable of shaping our own future and yet confronted by towering, seemingly impersonal, constraints. Those whose reflection leads them to reject the grandiose delusion of being puppet-masters but also to resist the supine conclusion that they are mere marionettes then have the same task of reconciling this experiential bivalance, and must do so if their moral choice is not to become inert or their 'political' action ineffectual. Consequently in facing up to the problem of structure and agency social theorists are not just addressing crucial technical problems in the study of society, they are also confronting the most pressing social problem of the human condition.

Thus what has happened is that theorists dealing with the structuring and transformation of social organization have at least (and at last) converged on a common problem. Provision of a promising solution to this central problem is now accepted by many as a kind of litmus paper: theories which fail the acid test do effectively cede any claim to provide the framework for general social theory. (For example to find that some approach is wholly deterministic, entirely objectivistic, or exclusively microscopic is ground enough for ceasing to consider it as a serious claimant.) Theories which pass the test may still be at all sorts of loggerheads with one another but they do now share a criterion for the assessment of their competing concepts and explanations, namely how well these contribute to the solution of the central problem. Moreover the very fact of addressing the same issue increases the chances of synthesis to the extent that the proffered solutions are based on compatible premisses.

In this respect, cultural analysis lags behind: indeed in general it seems to be the poor relation of structural analysis. For purposes of description there is a glaring lack of descriptive cultural 'units', and for purposes of explanation culture swings wildly from being the

supremely independent variable in some theories to become the passive dependent variable in others. Perhaps because of this state of the art, it is not common to find references to the problem of culture and agency or any significant convergence on it as the focal issue. Nevertheless this phrase denotes exactly the same dilemmas as those which have become widely recognized in the structural domain.

There is the same tension to be resolved both theoretically and experientially between the fund of ideas which in a real sense we feel free to accept or reject, and the fact (sometimes known but sometimes happening behind our backs) that the pool itself has been restricted or contaminated and that our sensed freedoms can be more a matter of manipulated feelings than of genuine liberty. There is a similar task of reconciling objective knowledge (however this is defined, and none but the radical relativists leave this category empty) with human subjectivity and our capacity for generating new interpretations within our heads or for the interpersonal negotiation of new meanings. There is an equivalent dilemma about how to transcend the divide between small-scale accountancy procedures, often contextually bound, and the existence of macroscopic symbol systems, operating trans-situationally.

The same problem then is just as central as in the structural field, but it involves different entia: namely the relations pertaining between ideas and the ideational influences operating between people. However, the status of cultural analysis as a poor relation means that any attempt to deal with the problem of culture and agency is going to have to confront conceptual poverty as far as these entities are concerned and will have to forge many of its own tools *en route*.

In undertaking the problem I have deliberately tried to travel light, working in the barest and sparest terms and thus giving room to only those components which seem necessary and sufficient to an utterly basic account of the linkage between culture and agency. Because of this most readers will probably be surprised by the lack of any reference to huge chunks of the literature on culture, by the total neglect of certain issues preoccupying major cultural theorists, and also by the failure of many of these giants to figure in the text at all.

Such absences are intentional: there is only an element of arbitrariness in that sometimes other thinkers could have been substituted for those examined and that usually alternative illustrations would have done just as well as those employed. So these absences

can only be justified by showing how the tool-kit used here was put together because the 'problem of culture and agency' was conceived of in a particular way, which in turn made this equipment appropriate for tackling it. Thus I have tried to clarify the task as I see it, and to justify the tools selected for it, in the following five theses.

On conflation

The way in which both problems are approached in the present work rests on one fundamental assertion, namely that what is being sought is a theoretical stance which is capable of *linking* 'structure and agency' or 'culture and agency', rather than *sinking* the difference between the 'parts' (organizational or ideational) and the 'people', who hold positions or ideas within them. Thus from the outset it must be made clear that these two problems are both being viewed in a distinctive way and, moreover, one which is far from commanding general assent – especially in the cultural field.

Thus when discussing 'structure' or 'culture' in relation to 'agency' I am talking about a relationship between two aspects of social life. However intimately they are intertwined (in, say, our experiences of marriage as both legal institution and daily practice), these are none the less analytically distinct. Few would disagree with this characterization of social reality as Janus-faced: indeed too many have concluded too quickly that the task is therefore how to look at both faces of the same medallion at once. It is precisely this methodological notion of trying to peer at the two simultaneously which is resisted here. The basic reason for avoiding this is that the 'parts' and the 'people' are *not* co-existent through time and therefore any approach which amalgamates them wrongly foregoes the possibility of examining the interplay between them over time. Thus for example, a particular marital structure pre-dates *our* contemporary constitution as married social subjects – which is an entirely different point from the perfectly compatible statements that previous actors through their prior social practices themselves constituted a given institution of marriage earlier in history (since this refers to agents long-dead), or that our present actions as married subjects are contributing to the transformation of this institution at some future time (since this refers to distant re-structuring). Any form of conceptualization which prevents examination of this interplay should therefore be resisted.

However, the dominant theoretical tendency in the structural domain and even more markedly in the cultural field, has indeed been to elide the 'parts' and the 'people'. I have called this generic error the Fallacy of Conflation and devoted Chapters 2, 3 and 4 to exploring the different versions it has taken in cultural analysis and to examining their specific drawbacks. Fundamentally what is wrong with conflationary theorizing is that it prevents the interplay between 'parts' and 'people' from being the foundation of cultural dynamics. This is because in every version of the Fallacy, the elision of the two elements withdraws any autonomy or independence from one of them, if not from both.

Conflation of the two levels of analysis always takes place in a particular direction and there are only three possible logical directions. The first pair make either the 'parts' or the 'people' an epiphenomenon of the other: they differ about which is held to be epiphenomenal but not about the legitimacy of elision *per se*. Thus either version renders the dependent element inert, be it 'parts' or 'people'. Consequently, adherents to either type of epiphenomemalism advance rather crude unilateral accounts when explaining cultural stability and change. In the one, cultural properties are simply formed and transformed by some untrammelled dominant group or placed at the mercy of capricious renegotiation by unconstrained agency. In the other, some cultural code or central value system imposes its choreography on cultural life and agents are reduced to *träger* or bearers of its properties, whether through oversocialization or mystification. If, as my initial assertion maintained, an adequate theoretical stance is one which acknowledges the interplay between culture and agency, then it must be predicated on some autonomy or independence being assigned to each.

However, the errors attaching to conflation do not depend on epiphenomenalism, or rendering one aspect of social life itself lifeless – whether in the structural or cultural domain. This is shown by the remaining possibility, namely 'central' conflation, where elision occurs in the 'middle'. Instead what happens is that autonomy is withheld from both 'parts' and 'people' and this has precisely the same effect of precluding any examination of their interplay. Here the properties of cultural systems and the properties of cultural interaction are conflated because they are presented as being so tightly constitutive of one another. Unlike everyday terms which involve mutual constitution, such as 'singing' (where song and singer have separate properties, some of which are irrelevant to the

practice – such as the circumstances of composition or the marital circumstances of singers, and some of which have an interplay that is vital to it – the song's difficulty and the singer's virtuosity), in central conflation matters are very different. For the intimacy of reciprocal constitution amounts to an actual elision of the two elements, which cannot be untied, and thus their influences upon one another cannot be unravelled. Once again the net effect of conflation is that the possibility of gaining explanatory leverage on cultural dynamics from the interplay between 'parts' and 'people' is relinquished from the outset.

On analytical dualism

In contradistinction to every version of conflation in social theory is the approach endorsed here, which is based four-square on analytical dualism. This emphatically is not the same thing as philosophical dualism, for there is no suggestion that we are dealing with separate entities, only analytically separable ones and ones which it is theoretically useful to treat separately. However, to forestall the obvious counter-objections from those whom I have just been criticizing it is necessary to justify both the utility and the feasibility of analytical dualism. Its usefulness will be briefly commended by reference to the increase in explanatory power which Lockwood gained in relation to social change by distinguishing between 'social integration' and 'system integration'. Obviously I will have to demonstrate that a parallel distinction can be employed in the cultural realm. This will involve showing not only the desirability but also the practicability of its use there. In other words, I will have to produce some workable means *of* distinguishing between 'parts' and 'people' in the field of culture– some way of overcoming the methodological difficulties undoubtedly involved in rendering analytical dualism operational and thus of repelling the charge that these are matters of philosophical intractability.

Lockwood insisted on the possibility and profitability of distinguishing the orderly or conflictual relations pertaining between groups of actors (the degree of social integration) from the orderly or contradictory relations prevailing between parts of the social structure (the degree of system integration). The point of the exercise was to theorize about the *interplay* between them, for he rightly argued that neither element alone provided the sufficient conditions of structural change. Thus System integration could be low but unless its contradictions were actualized and amplified by

sectional social groups, they could be contained and stasis would persist because of this high social integration. Alternatively group antagonism could be profound (low social integration) without leading to significant change in society, unless it was linked to Systemic contradictions. In short it was the conjunction between the two elements which furnished the key to structural stability or change.

The aim is obviously to see whether the same explanatory pay-off can be gained by using a parallel distinction in the cultural field. In attempting to draw it, the first major obstacle was that culture has rarely been viewed as something susceptible to malintegration, let alone been conceptualized in terms of its degree of integration (either comparatively or historically). Instead there has been a pervasive Myth of Cultural Integration, appropriated by sociology from early anthropology, which perpetuates an image of culture as a coherent pattern, a uniform ethos or a symbolically consistent universe. The net results of this enduring Mythology, the defects of which are examined in Chapter 1, is that no concept of 'cultural contradictions' was readily available to stand as the counterpart to the familiar notion of 'structural contradiction'. Ironically, in view of his reputation as a normative consensus theorist, it was Durkheim, in his lesser known work on the evolution of educational thought, who furnished the ingredients for conceptualizing cultural contradictions and their contrast category, cultural complementarities.

In other words the utilization of analytical dualism in the cultural domain meant first forging the appropriate concepts – after abandoning the traditional selective perception of nothing but cultural coherence. The distinction which was finally drawn was a deliberate attempt to parallel the way in which Lockwood had differentiated between the structural relations of 'parts' and of 'people'. On the one hand, then, there is *logical consistency*, that is the degree of consistency between the component parts of culture. This is a property of the world of ideas, of World Three, as Popper would put it; or, if preferred, of the contents of libraries. In fact we utilize this concept every day when we say that the ideas of X are consistent with those of Y, or that theory or belief A contradicts theory or belief B. These are quite different from another kind of everyday statement, namely that the ideas of X were influenced by those of Y, where we are talking about causal effects which are properties of people – such as the influences of teachers on pupils, of television on its audience, or of earlier thinkers on later ones. This latter, is

causal consensus, that is the degree of cultural uniformity produced by the imposition of ideas by one set of people on another through the whole gamut of familiar techniques – manipulation, mystification, legitimation, naturalization, persuasion and argument. Causal consensus is thus intimately allied to the use of power and influence, whereas logical consistency is entirely independent of them since it exists whether or not it is socially exploited or concealed or, to clinch the point, regardless of its even being recognized.

To underline the parallel with Lockwood's distinction, the degree of logical consistency was labelled 'Cultural System integration' (hereafter CS) and the extent of causal cohesion was termed 'Socio-Cultural integration' (hereafter S-C). The former refers to relations between the components of culture; the latter to the relationships between cultural agents. The CS/S-C distinction therefore maps onto that between culture without a knowing subject and culture with a knowing subject. However, it is one thing to accept the advantages of drawing such distinctions in principle (because they promise increased explanatory power), or even to affirm their validity (because they confirm two different everyday encounters). It is quite another to operationalize the dividing line between 'parts' and 'people' satisfactorily, and some critics took Lockwood to task on precisely this point.

This problem takes up the whole of Chapter 5 which argues in favour of using the rules of logic as the method for delineating between the two. As an attempt to develop a methodology for utilizing analytical dualism in cultural analysis it basically works as follows: culture as a whole is taken to refer to all intelligibilia, that is to any item which has the dispositional capacity of being understood by someone. Within this I then distinguish the Cultural System, which is that sub-set of items to which the law of contradiction can be applied. These are propositions, for only statements which assert truth or falsity can be deemed to be in contradiction or to be consistent with one another. In turn this means that the Cultural System is restricted to the propositional register of society at any given time. The justification for defining the CS in this way rests partly on the fact that it meets the criterion of methodological workability, but partly, too, on the self-evident importance of those things held to be true or false in society at any given time or place.

Obviously we do not live by propositions alone (any more than we live logically); in addition, we generate myths, are moved by

mysteries, become rich in symbolics and ruthless in manipulating hidden persuaders. But all of these elements are precisely the stuff of Socio-Cultural interaction. For they are all matters of interpersonal influence, whether we are talking at one extreme of hermeneutic understanding (including religious experience at the furthest extremity) or of the manipulative assault and battery of ideas used ideologically. All those other non-propositional things to which we assent or over which we dissent – such as tastes and preferences, likes and dislikes, affinities and animosities, patriotism and prejudice– lie in between. And all of this takes place outside of, *en dépit de*, the canons of logic, whether knowingly on the part of actors (proclaiming the mystery of faith), or whether imposed on unknowing others (recipients of symbolic machinations), or whether as that semi-knowledgeable mish-mash called 'public opinion'.

Clearly the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural life do not exist or operate independently of one another; they overlap, intertwine and are mutually influential. But this is precisely the point, for I am *not* asserting dualism but rather the utility of an *analytically* dualistic approach, the main recommendation for which is the very fact that it allows this interplay to be explored. It will be obvious too that making the distinction in this way depends on endorsing the universality of the law of contradiction (universal applicability being its great comparative and historical attraction). However, since this itself is not universally accepted, much of Chapter 5 is devoted to justifying its endorsement.

None of this means that there is no other way of distinguishing between 'parts' and 'people' in the cultural domain: perhaps others with greater ingenuity can produce alternatives and will do so in the future. But in this work the tools had to be forged as it proceeded, for I could discover no systematic attempt to use analytical dualism in the cultural field and therefore had little upon which to build, except the hunch that to parallel Lockwood's approach to the structural domain would prove fruitful. It may indeed be that by criticizing this preliminary attempt to draw a parallel distinction, a better form of delineation emerges to render this parallelism even more profitable in the explanation of cultural dynamics.

On the interface

Having made this distinction between the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural interaction, two major questions have to be

addressed: how do we conceptualize their interplay; and, through this, how do we gain theoretical leverage upon cultural dynamics? Our starting point, the distinguishing of logical relations (pertaining to the CS) from causal ones (pertaining to the S-C), allows for their independent variation and in turn makes the *interface* between them the site of intensive investigation. Our procedure – the attempt to conceptualize how certain properties of the 'parts' and certain properties of the 'people' actually combine at the interface – is of course at variance with any form of conflationary theorizing. For this task, which takes Chapters 6, 7 and 8 to accomplish, is brushed aside by conflationists who sweep through the interface because of their epiphenomenalism or sweep it away due to their notion of mutual constitution. My objective is to theorize about the *conditions* for cultural stability or change, and my basic hypothesis is that these conditions are rooted in the *conjunction* between the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural interaction – just as they are grounded in the conjuncture between social and system integration in the structural domain.

Another way of putting this is that the present enterprise seeks to avoid being stung by either of Foucault's ways of tangling with these nettles. In his earlier works, where 'discourse' was presented as an abstract structure of thought (not without similarities to the present notion of the Cultural System), it was also viewed as uninfluenced by non-discursive elements like interests and power (which in the present text are held to fuel Socio-Cultural interaction). Consequently at that stage he had to emphasize the *arbitrariness of discursive changes*, which was effectively to conclude that cultural dynamics can be described but cannot be grasped theoretically. In his later work he switched his stress to the other side of the divide and overemphasized the role of power in constituting knowledge, which now became *relative to* Socio-Cultural contingencies. However, such contingencies were viewed as patternless processes where domination was confronted by a recalcitrant 'agonism', a sort of inveterate thirst for struggle, independent of particular conditions. Consequently the later work endorses the *arbitrariness of Socio-Cultural interaction* because no account is given of why, when or how people do struggle. Now, the processes of cultural change can be described but a theoretical account of the different forms and consequences of cultural struggles cannot be provided. Thus the early work is confined to one side of the interface and the later work to the other: my aim is rather to grasp the nettle firmly in the middle, dragging up its roots on either side. This is to deny an arbitrary

character both to the changes taking place and to the processes producing them.

The underlying approach can be summarized quite succinctly. Generically it is how contradictory or complementary relations between 'parts' of the Cultural System map onto orderly or conflictual relationships between 'people' at the Socio-Cultural level which determines whether the outcome is cultural stability or change. This means that we need to specify, first, which Systemic relations impinge upon agency and how they do so; and, second, which social relations affect how agents respond to and react back on the Cultural System.

We begin with the Cultural System and we do so because any Socio-Cultural action, wherever it is situated historically, takes place in the context of innumerable interrelated theories, beliefs and ideas which had developed prior to it, and, as will be seen, exert a conditional influence on it. For as Cohen has convincingly argued,

> in all sociological enquiry it *is* assumed that some features of social structure and culture are strategically important and enduring and that they provide the limits within which particular social situations can occur. On this assumption the action approach can help to explain the nature of the situations and how they affect conduct. It does not explain the social structure and culture as such, except by lending itself to a developmental enquiry which must start from some previous point at which structural and cultural elements are treated as given.[1]

The strength of this point does not depend on the infinite-regress argument: it lies in the fact that by moving *one* stage further back in time, in order to explain the *present* cultural context, one has to take into account the *previous* Cultural System from which it developed. However, the question still remains, which of these Systemic relations do impinge on action contexts at any given time? It has already been mentioned that the law of contradiction will be used to assess the inconsistency or complementarity of items in the Cultural System at any point in time. However, at that time not all of these will or can be known, and of those which are known, many involve propositions which no one then supports. Therefore analysis does *not* begin with a complete description of the Cultural System: a full itemization of its contradictions and complementarities being both impossible and irrelevant. Instead we start with *the ideas which at any given time have holders*, and restrict ourselves to these items. For only if an item is held by someone can its logical relationships with other items have any effect on agency.

In short, analysis opens by examining the effects of holding ideas with particular logical relations (of contradiction or complementarity to others) – not with the (Socio-Cultural) reasons for these being held, reasons which would necessarily have been conditioned by an anterior cultural context. It is then maintained that to uphold ideas which are embroiled in a contradiction or enmeshed in complementarities places those who do so in different action contexts where they are confronted with different situational logics.

In brief, contradictions mould problem-ridden situations for actors which they must confront *if and when* they realize, or are made to acknowledge, that the proposition(s) they endorse is enmeshed in some inconsistency. What they do next is not determined: they have the options of irrational dogmatism or of abandoning the theory or belief altogether, *but* if they want to go on holding it non-dogmatically then their only recourse is to repair the inconsistency, that is the force of the situational logic. By contrast, complementarities mould problem-free situations for agents who can explore their ideational environments without danger or difficulty and from this build up an elaborate conspectus, the elements of which are mutually consistent and reinforcing. This by contrast fosters a situational logic of reproduction aimed at retaining this felicitous cluster and discouraging alterations in it.

On the other hand, these Systemic influences are only part of the story about how cultural situations are moulded for actors. The other part is made up of the causal relations operating between groups and individuals at the Socio-Cultural level. Such relationships have their own dynamics, rooted in different material interests, producing various forms of social stratification and different ideal interests, such as ethnic, religious or linguistic divides (which are ideational but not propositional). These make their own contribution to cultural stability or change through the influences they exert upon what actors do on the spot. They form the other side of the interface and are thus co-determinants (with Systemic conditioning) of what actually takes place there. Systemic conditioning only appears (and this is nothing more than appearance) to be decisive when Socio-Cultural influences happen to be pulling in the same direction. It is, therefore, easier to pin-point their independent contribution when social orderliness or disorderliness are pulling in different directions, that is operating at variance with Systemic conditioning. Under such conditions one can readily identify the main ways in which they work at the interface.

It is universally the case that Socio-Cultural imbalances, and the power differentials deriving from them, affect the degree of awareness or 'discursive penetration' that actors have of ideational contradictions or complementarities themselves. Thus, for example, when some dominant material-interest group supports a set of propositions which are embroiled in contradiction, they will use their power to control the visibility of inconsistent items through a variety of 'containment strategies', the most blatant of which is censorship. If successful, the subordinate agents will remain unruffled by the inconsistencies attending the group's beliefs for they are in the dark about them; the Systemic fault-line represented by the contradiction will remain unexploited, even by those who have the interests to split it wide open, because power has kept it unperceived. Consequently, in this instance, social imbalance produces orderly Socio-Cultural relations, maintaining the cultural status quo whilever agents' access to information can be controlled.

Nevertheless, power relations still affect Systemic stability, even when they do pull in the same direction. This can be illustrated from a set of complementary items, like the cluster of propositions about caste and Karma that Weber discusses. The Hindu elite was the most culturally proficient and it used its power to protect this mastery from change which would threaten the benefits associated with it. Here the Brahminate beneficiaries responded by elaborative reproduction, exemplary leadership and the encouragement of imitative practice, together with the repression of internal innovation because of its disruptive potential. Socio-Cultural action thus protects, preserves and prolongs the Systemic status quo.

Finally, however, the nature of Socio-Cultural relations affects which of the responses forged under the pressure of the situational logic can actually be made to stick. Again, fundamentally and universally no corrective formula (generated to repair contradictions) and no reproductive scheme (elaborated to protect complementarities) can be made to 'take' in society when the contemporaneous distribution of interests and power do not gel with it. Instead a variety of ideational shifts will be registered depending on the nature of the disjuncture, ranging from progressive accommodation to counter-actualization and including schismatism and Specialization. (Which of these will occur under what conditions is the subject of Chapters 7 and 8.)

In short, cultural stability or Cultural Elaboration are at the mercy of the conjunction between the two levels. Cultural dynamics are governed by how the influences stemming from the

Cultural System gel with those emanating from Socio-Cultural relations, at the interface where they intersect. This is why we turn to the morphogenetic perspective to provide an overall framework for conceptualizing and theorizing about cultural elaboration.

On morphogenesis and morphostasis

What has been said so far about advancing on this shapeless, seething and shifting thing that we call culture is that the most promising way of coming to grips with it (exposing the patterning of processes and end-products within this flux) is through the use of analytical dualism. Thus in the previous three theses I have been sketching in how one might achieve this aim through conceptualizing culture in terms of parts and people and examining the interface between them.

In the structural domain the theoretical framework which is most explicitly based on analytical dualism is the morphogenetic approach. In social theory this perspective recognizes that the unique feature distinguishing social Systems from organic or mechanical ones is their capacity to undergo radical restructuring. As a process 'morphogenesis' refers to the complex interchanges that produce change in a System's given form, structure or state ('morphostasis' is the reverse), the end-product being termed 'Elaboration'. Of course action is ceaseless and essential to both the stable continuation or the further elaboration of the system. However, when morphogenesis results, then subsequent interaction will be different from earlier action precisely because it is now conditioned by the elaborated consequences of that prior action. Hence the morphogenetic perspective is not only dualistic but sequential, dealing in endless three-part cycles of Structural Conditioning → Social interaction → Structural Elaboration. The suggestion is that this framework be transferred to the cultural field, using equivalent analytical phases (i.e. Cultural Conditioning → Socio-Cultural interaction → Cultural Elaboration), in order to unravel the dialectical interplay of culture and agency over time.

To work in terms of these three-part cycles is to accord *time* a central place in social theory. Time is incorporated as a theoretical variable rather than simply as a medium in which events take place. This represents the methodological key to the experiential problem of how we can simultaneously feel bound to plod round the cultural treadmill yet also brim over with criticism and creativity – the tension between being conditioned to do things one way but

being able to conceive of doing them differently. It is also the way of avoiding the transposition of this experience into a theoretical stance which embraces its eternal duality but then ends up unable to specify under what conditions we are condemned to reproduce our culture versus which conditions allow us the freedom to transform it. Those who endorse the 'duality of culture', rather than analytical dualism, then simply oscillate between the two, insisting on both but unable to tell us when one rather than the other will predominate. Thus they talk about our inescapable contribution to the recursiveness of culture, because our very practices have, perforce, to draw on language, rules and signification schemes and thus reproduce them, but simultaneously they insist that praxis itself can always introduce cultural transformations. Cultural change thus becomes an immanent but indeterminate possibility, equally likely or unlikely at any given moment and therefore unpredictable and inexplicable.

What is crucially different about the morphogenetic perspective is the core notion that culture and agency operate over different time periods. This is what enables us to decipher our experiential bivalence and to disentangle that which seems to make for theoretical indeterminancy. This core notion which is fundamental to the morphogenetic perspective is based on two simple propositions: that the Cultural System logically predates the Socio-Cultural action(s) which transform it; and that Cultural Elaboration logically post-dates such interaction.

Thus the interface that was discussed in the last thesis is always 'the present', wherever that happens to be situated historically. However, this T_1 (present-time) is peculiarly pivotal in the morphogenetic approach. As Markovic expressed it, both 'past and future are *living in the present*. Whatever human beings do in the present is decisively influenced by the past and by the future . . . the future is not something that will come later, independently of our will. There are *several possible futures* and one of them *has to be made*.'[2] Thus what was being disentangled at the interface was, first, anterior cultural conditioning, that is how the prior development of ideas (from earlier interaction) conditions the current context of action, confronting agents with both problem-free and problem-ridden clusters of beliefs, theories and ideas. But this is no bland confrontation in which actors survey the ideational array and unconstrainedly take their pick. For we are all born into and can only live embedded in an ideational context which is not of our own making. Our very knowledge about it, our vested interests in reject-

ing it or retaining it and our objective capacities for changing it have already been distributed to us *before* the action starts.

Second, however, there is the actual response of agency to this inherited cultural context and, in responding, actors can exploit their degrees of cultural freedom to great (elaborative) effect. For what was said above about the existence of cultural constraints should never be taken as an endorsement of cultural Determinism, partly because the structural conditioning of material interests is also operative in the same 'present' and pulling in different directions. More importantly, however, is the quintessential reflective ability of human beings to fight back against their conditioning (not nullifying it for if nothing else it dictates language and topic), giving them the capacity to respond with originality to their present context. (Specifically they do this either by taking advantage of inconsistencies within it and then generating new forms of syncretism and pluralism from it, or by exploring novel combinations of compatible elements within it and then advancing new types of systematization and specialization in the field of ideas.) If this insistence upon our reflective originality seems to be a theological aberration on my part, so be it, but it was one universal enough to commend itself to Marx when he maintained that men make history but not under the circumstances of their choosing. Hence Voluntarism has an important place in this perspective but it is ever-trammelled by past cultural conditioning and by the current politics of the possible.

Thus Cultural Elaboration is the future which is forged in the present, hammered out of past inheritance by current innovation. Because of this, the elaborated sequences through which culture is transformed are the joint products of the situational logics impinging from the Cultural System on contexts in which agents find themselves *and* their Socio-Cultural responses to them. This is the generic process by which the cultural future is made in the present. It is also what determines which form of future (not its contents) is made, and in turn makes this a patterned not a patternless process.

Thus we will be discussing different scenarios which culminate in cultural morphogenesis and in none of these are the discursive changes which result in the least way arbitrary – any more than the interplay between the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural interaction is a patternless process. Obviously considerable effort will have to be devoted in the text to the derivation of morphogenetic sequences culminating in Cultural Elaboration as well as to their

counterparts, the negative feed-back loops resulting in morphostasis or cultural reproduction – the two, of course, often operating simultaneously in different parts of the cultural domain. All that is being signalled here is that the morphogenetic perspective will provide a helpful framework for understanding the structuring of culture over time and one which enables specific forms of Cultural Elaboration to be explained. This way of formulating the theoretical enterprise leads directly to the last thesis.

On unification

This work ends by reconsidering its starting point. I opened with the assertion that the problem of culture and agency directly paralleled the much more familiar problem of structure and agency. All of the intervening theses have signalled how this parallelism is perceived and explored. In particular much of the text is devoted to examining the hunch that Lockwood's approach to the explanation of structural change might prove equally useful if it could be transferred to the cultural field. Despite all the difficulties encountered in adapting it to this purpose, the pay-off seems well worth the effort. Indeed it exceeds expectations for it opens out a whole new vista – the possible conceptual and theoretical unification of structural and cultural analysis from the morphogenetic perspective.

But why is this unification so desirable and why is its promise considered to be such a bonus? The answer is basically that it enables us to go beyond the mere assertion that structure and culture enjoy relative autonomy from one another. Crucial as this is, as the ultimate reason for resisting the Fallacy of Conflation, it simply does not go far enough. To assert that the two are relatively autonomous is to say nothing about their relative importance for social stability and change at any given time. Yet without this there is the danger of unjustifiably slipping into giving one the dominant role for all time, or of unnecessarily throwing in the sponge and deeming this to be an empirically variable matter dependent on episodic contingencies.

The second reason for pursuing their unification under the same conceptual umbrella is that if structure and culture do have relative autonomy from one another, then there is interplay between them which it is necessary to explore theoretically. For unless this is done, we remain stuck with the valid but vacuous assertion that ideas are forces in social conflict and that the socially forceful are also

culturally influential. None save the complete materialist or idealist would deny this, but we would still remain mute about how these processes operate and whether their influences are reciprocal.

Analysing both structure and culture from the morphogenetic perspective allows one to get to grips with these problems. By utilizing this common framework it becomes easier to see *how* structure and culture intersect in the middle element of their respective morphogenetic cycles: through structural-interest groups endorsing some corpus of ideas in order to advance their material concerns but then becoming enmeshed in the situational logic of that part of the cultural domain; and through ideal-interest groups seeking powerful sponsors to promote their ideas but then immediately embroiling cultural discourse in power-play within the structural domain. Using the same conceptual framework thus enables one to pin-point the mechanics of the inter-penetration between structure and culture. Even so, to show how they are mutually influential is still not to answer the question as to whether these effects are of equal importance.

The final step, then, is to argue that the question 'when does structure exert more influence over culture and vice versa?' is one which now becomes amenable to solution. If structural and cultural dynamics are both conceptualized in terms of morphogenetic/morphostatic cycles, it becomes possible to theorize about their influence on one another by examining how the cycles proper to each can mesh together in various ways and with varying consequences. Thus Chapter 9 is devoted to inspecting different combinations of morphostasis and morphogenesis in structure and culture. It is then argued that particular configurations are associated with reciprocal influences between the two, while other patterns make either structure or culture more influential for the other and for social change – for the time being. There is also some promise here of being able to explain what sorts of structural and cultural changes are induced under the different configurations.

However, much of this work remains at a high level of theoretical abstraction and at certain points becomes purely speculative for want of appropriate data. Thus the latter part of Chapter 8 contains a free-ranging sketch of how this approach to culture could be pushed forward as a research programme and what material would be needed for its advancement and application. Since cultural analysis still remains the poor relation of structural analysis, this gap will have to be closed before full advantage can be derived from the theoretical unification of the two fields which Chapter 9

presents in skeletal form. When some flesh has been put on these bare theoretical bones, then it should become possible to explain two key issues – whether historically or comparatively and whether societally or sectionally. When theoretical unification is complete it will enable a specification to be provided of the conditions under which structural and cultural dynamics are interrelated in determinate but varying ways. Equally, at any given point in time, a unified theoretical approach will permit a full account to be given of how discursive struggles are socially organized and of how social struggles are culturally conditioned.

The object of this book is not merely to put the problem of culture and agency on the agenda for social theory but to position it there alongside the problem of structure and agency. For, whatever the shortcomings of this text itself, the conviction remains that what proves to be an adequate solution to the one problem will also serve for the other and that substantial benefits must accrue from their theoretical unification.