FORMATIONS OF MODERNITY

UNDERSTANDING MODERN SOCIETIES: AN INTRODUCTION · BOOK 1

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CHAPTER 5 THE CULTURAL FORMATIONS OF MODERN SOCIETY

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CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

> Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language ... This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought.
> (Williams, 1983, p.87)

In earlier units we looked at crucial moments, processes and ideas in the historical development of the political, economic and social spheres of modern societies. This chapter examines another part of the story — namely, the formation of modern culture. As the quotation above indicates, 'culture' is a complex term and carries particular meanings in different disciplines. We shall start, therefore, in the next section, by considering what the term 'culture' means and examining its use as a sociological concept.

As we shall see, in the most important sociological use of the term, culture is understood as referring to the whole texture of a society and the way language, symbols, meanings, beliefs and values organize social practices. The sociological analysis of culture in this sense has led to the development of a distinctive 'tool-kit' of concepts and forms of classification. A number of these derive from what is called a structuralist approach and may at first seem rather abstract and theoretical. These concepts will be introduced and explained in Section 3, which will also examine how they have been used to analyse cultural formations and cultural phenomena in the work of Émile Durkheim and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

The structuralist perspective has been criticized as of limited value in addressing questions of cultural change, and therefore as being rather different from more traditional sociological analyses of culture which are very much concerned with questions of how cultures change. Section 4 will consider the transition in western society from a feudal to a capitalist culture by focusing on Max Weber's argument that it was a distinctive form of *religious* thinking which led to the unique, and uniquely successful, culture of capitalism which developed in the West. Weber's approach provides a different methodology for analysing culture, but there are significant links with Durkheim's, notably in according religion a central role in determining cultural formation.

Finally, we shall examine the cultural changes associated with industrialization, urbanization and secularization which emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century. Analyses by Weber, Marx, Freud and the Frankfurt School of social scientists all point to a growing disillusion with this scientific and rationalist culture and further show the significance of values and beliefs as constituents of culture. In reading about the ways in which some of the greatest of sociologists have

set about classifying societies, and explaining cultural change, we learn something important. It is that, in attempting to analyse a pattern of behaviour in any given society, we are forced to reflect on how individuals *think,* communicate and attribute meaning to things. The attempt to relate individual experience to the wider social structure is the essence of sociology, and at its heart is the concept of culture.

2 DEFINING CULTURE

The meaning of the term 'culture' has changed over time, especially in the period of the transition from traditional social formations to modernity.

The **first** and earliest meaning of 'culture' can be found in writing of the fifteenth century, when the word was used to refer to the tending of crops (cultivation) or looking after animals. This meaning is retained in modern English in such words as 'agriculture' and 'horticulture'.

The **second** meaning developed in the early sixteenth century. It extended the idea of 'cultivation' from plants and animals to more abstract things, like the human mind. Francis Bacon, for example, wrote of 'the culture and manurance of minds' (1605) and Thomas Hobbes of 'a culture of their minds' (1651). There soon developed the idea that only some people — certain individuals, groups or classes — had 'cultured' or cultivated minds and manners; and that only some nations (mainly European ones) exhibited a high standard of culture or civilization.

By the eighteenth century, Raymond Williams observed, 'culture' had acquired distinct class overtones. Only the wealthy classes of Europe could aspire to such a high level of refinement. The modern meaning of the term 'culture', which associates it with 'the arts' is also closely related to this definition, since it refers not only to the actual work of artists and intellectuals, but to the general state of civilization associated with the pursuit of the arts by a cultivated élite. Raymond Williams commented that 'this seems often now the most widespread use: *culture* is music, literature, painting, and sculpture, theatre and film ... sometimes with the addition of philosophy, scholarship and history' (Williams, 1983, p.87).

However, the notion of culture has been extended in the twentieth century to include the 'popular culture' of the working class and the lower middle class — a popular culture which is penetrated by, though not the same as, the contents of the mass media (film, television, sports, popular music, newspapers and magazines). Rather than this popular culture being an extension of the notion of the cultivated tastes of a 'cultured person', it is in tension with or can be said to have displaced it. There is often a sharp distinction drawn between 'high' and 'popular' culture, and the popular arts are sometimes seen as antagonistic to the fine arts.

Note that there is an interplay here between using such words as 'cultivated' and 'cultured' in a *descriptive* way (e.g. in characterizing the arts and artistic pursuits) and using them in an *evaluative* way which implies that some ways of life or some kinds of taste are of higher value than others. Much of what is sometimes called the 'cultural debate' about standards in the arts and the debasement of high culture by mass culture, stems from this ambiguity between the descriptive and the evaluative uses of the word 'culture'.

A **third** definition of 'culture', which has been most influential in the social sciences, stems from the Enlightenment. In the eighteenth century, writers used the word to refer to the general secular process of social development (as in 'European society and culture'). The Enlightenment view, common in Europe in the eighteenth century, was that there was a process of unilinear, historical self-development of humanity, which all societies would pass through, and in which Europe played the central, universal role because it was the highest point of civilization or cultured human development.

An important qualification in this usage was introduced by the German writer Herder in his book *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–91). Herder criticized this Eurocentric 'subjugation and domination of the four quarters of the globe'. 'The very thought of a superior European culture,' he wrote, 'is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature.'

> It is necessary, Herder argued, in a decisive innovation, to speak of 'cultures' in the plural: the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation [and between different nations]. This sense was widely developed, in the Romantic movement, as an alternative to the orthodox and dominant '*civilization*'. It was first used to emphasise national and traditional cultures, including the new concept of 'folk-culture'. (Williams, 1983, p.89)

Herder's innovation has proved highly significant for the social sciences, especially sociology and anthropology. In this **fourth** definition, the word 'cultures' (in the plural), refers to the distinctive ways of life, the shared values and meanings, common to different groups — nations, classes, sub-cultures (as, for example, in phrases like 'working-class culture' or 'bourgeois culture') — and historical periods. This is sometimes known as the 'anthropological' definition of culture.

Finally, a **fifth** meaning of the word 'culture' has emerged, which has had a considerable impact on all the social sciences and the humanities in general in recent years. It is derived from social anthropology, and like the fourth definition it refers to shared meanings within groups and nations. It differs in emphasis from the fourth definition, however, by concentrating more on the symbolic dimension, and on what culture *does* rather than on what culture *is*. It sees culture as a social practice rather than as a thing (the arts) or a state of being (civilization). This

way of thinking about culture is grounded in the study of *language*, a practice which is seen as fundamental to the production of meaning. The anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, who did much to develop this approach, once described his own work as 'the study of the life of signs at the heart of social life'.

Those who adopt this fifth definition of culture argue that language is a fundamental social practice because it enables those people who share a common language system to communicate meaningfully with one another. Society, which arises through relations between individuals, would be impossible without this capacity to communicate — to exchange meanings and thus build up a shared culture. According to this view, things and events in the natural world exist, but have no intrinsic meaning. It is language — our capacity to communicate about them, using signs and symbols (like words or pictures) — which gives them meaning. When a group shares a culture, it shares a common set of meanings which are constructed and exchanged through the practice of using language. According to this definition, then, 'culture' is *the set of practices by which meanings are produced and exchanged within a group.*

It is important not to adopt too restricted a view of language. It is not only words which operate like a language. All sign and symbol systems work in this way. By language we mean any system of communication which uses signs as a way of referencing objects in the real world and it is this process of *symbolization* which enables us to communicate meaningfully about the world. Words create meaning because they function as symbols. Thus, the word 'dog' is the symbol or sign for the animal that barks. (We must not confuse the symbol for the real thing; as one linguist put it, a dog barks, but the word 'dog' cannot bark!) We could also represent, or 'say something meaningful' about the animal by a drawing, photograph, moving image, sculpture, cartoon or cave painting. So, when we say that language is fundamental to culture, we are referring to *all* the symbol and sign-systems through which meaning is produced and circulated in our culture.

Thus, even material objects can function as 'signs'. Two pieces of wood nailed together form the symbol of the Cross, which carries powerful meanings in Christian cultures. The crown is used as a symbol of secular or religious power and authority. Jeans and sweaters are signs of leisure and informality. There is a language of dress, of fashion, of appearance, of gestures, as there is a language for every other social activity. Each is a means of communicating meaning about this activity and the activity could not exist, as a social practice, outside of meaning. Thus every social activity has a *symbolic* dimension, and this dimension of symbolization and meaning is what we mean by 'culture'.

In this fifth definition, cultural practices are meaning-producing practices, practices which use signs and symbols to 'make meaning' — hence, they are often described as *signifying practices* (sign-ifying practices).

Let us summarize. We have identified five main definitions of the term 'culture':

1 Culture = cultivating the land, crops, animals.
2 Culture = the cultivation of the mind; the arts; civilization.
3 Culture = a general process of social development; culture as a universal process (the Enlightenment conception of culture).
4 Culture = the meanings, values, ways of life (cultures) shared by particular nations, groups, classes, periods (following Herder).
5 Culture = the practices which produce meaning; signifying practices.

None of these definitions has entirely disappeared. Each is still active in contemporary usage, as we shall discover as the argument of the chapter develops.

3 ANALYSING CULTURE

Now that we have a better idea of what culture is, how do we go about analysing it? This depends on which of the five definitions of 'culture' we are using. Take the fourth and fifth definitions, which have had the most impact on the social sciences. According to the fourth definition, we should analyse the beliefs, values and meanings — the powerful symbols — shared by a particular group, class, people or nation. In Section 4 of this chapter, when we discuss Weber and the transition from a religious to a secular culture, as Europe moved into the 'modern' period, we shall do exactly that. But let us stay for the moment with the fifth definition — culture as 'signifying practice' — in order to see what an analysis of culture using this definition looks like and how this method of analysis works.

The shift from the fourth definition (culture as shared meanings and ways of life) to the fifth definition (culture as the practices which produce meaning) marks a significant break in cultural analysis. Both definitions point to similar aspects of culture, but each focuses on very different things. The fourth concentrates on the meanings which groups share (e.g. religious beliefs); the fifth on the practices by which meanings are produced. Put another way, the fourth is concerned with the *contents* of a culture; the fifth with cultural *practices*. Also, the fourth focuses on culture as a whole way of life; the fifth concentrates on the interrelationships between the components that make up a particular cultural practice. One commentator has summed up this difference in approach as a movement 'from "what" to "how", from the substantive attitude to the adjectival attitude' (Poole, 1969, p.14). In looking, for example, at the totemic objects used in tribal cultures, anthropologists using the fourth definition would ask, 'What is

totemism?', whereas analysts using the fifth definition would ask, 'How are totemic phenomena arranged?'

Arrangement is what the latter approach highlights. We can see what this means by taking an example. In analysing a ritual event, such as a wedding feast or reception in traditional societies, an analysis which uses the fifth definition would begin by looking at who sits next to the bride and groom at the main table. Decisions about who sits where at weddings have traditionally been made on the basis of who are the nearest relatives of the bride and groom. Usually these are the parents. Brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and cousins are placed further away, in a clearly hierarchical seating arrangement. The seating arrangement — the way parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, etc., are placed in relation to one another — has a clear pattern or *structure*. It also carries a clear meaning or message. In kinship systems where uncles rank as 'closer' to children than their natural fathers, the position of honour next to the bride and groom would normally be occupied by the uncle, not the father.

Thus, to analyse the wedding feast as a meaningful cultural event, we must examine the practices and rules according to which different relations are seated, and the arrangement of seating positions which results from this practice. It is this 'structure' which 'tells us' something, which reveals the event's cultural meaning. Notice that each individual position at the table is less important than its relation to all the other positions. It is the *relation* to the others, not the position in itself, which carries meaning. The groom's father's place, for example, is important because it is close to where the bride and groom are sitting. The bride's father must be equally close, but on the other side, or else he will feel slighted by comparison with the groom's father.

To get the cultural meaning of the feast, we must analyse the structure and what it means. Each place in the structure functions as a sign. It symbolizes or stands for a particular relationship within the kinship system. To understand or 'decode' the meaning of this arrangement, we need access to the language or code within which these relationships make sense — the kinship system or language of kinship in that particular culture.

This approach to the analysis of culture looks for meaning in the arrangement, the pattern, the symbolic structure of an event. That is why it became known as *structuralism*. The advent of structuralism as a methodology or approach marked an intellectual revolution in the analysis of culture. It was pioneered by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908), who built upon ideas developed for the study of language by the linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). Lévi-Strauss was also influenced by the early founding figure of modern sociology, Émile Durkheim. (See *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*: STRUCTURALISM.)

Structuralism, as we can see from the 'wedding feast' example, looks at the symbolic structure of an event in order to discover its cultural

meaning. However, it has been extensively criticized for being unable to deal with social change, and therefore for being ahistorical. Also, unlike more conventional approaches in social science, it does not treat culture as 'reflecting' in some way the socio-economic structure of society (for example, the way the social class of the people getting married affects how much is spent on wedding receptions). In Section 4 of this chapter, we shall examine the role which culture played in the great historical transition from traditional or feudal society to early modern capitalism, and this analysis of culture and historical change (based largely on the work of another of sociology's founding figures, Max Weber) will draw more directly upon conventional sociological analyses of culture. However, my general argument is that there need not be a competition between the two approaches. It is possible to combine some of the advances of both structuralism and the sociological analysis of cultural change; and a non-dogmatic structuralist approach can throw interesting light on the analysis of cultural change.

To explain how the structuralist analysis of culture emerged entails adopting what might be called a 'structuralist' re-reading of a founding father of sociology, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). I shall aim to show that Durkheim did work, and can be read, in a structuralist way. Why would anyone want to re-read Durkheim in this way? There are a number of reasons. One is that such a reading produces a reassessment of Durkheim's work. He has often been seen as having laid the foundations for a *positivistic* approach to sociology, as in his requirement (in *The Rules of Sociological Method* and in *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*) that social scientists treat 'social facts as things'. (See *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*: DURKHEIM.) Seen in this light, however, it becomes difficult to place his last major text *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) — a text about Australian aborigines and Amer-Indian culture, not monks, nuns or priests!

This latter text of Durkheim's would seem to be of more interest to anthropologists who study pre-literate societies than to sociologists who study modern industrial societies. However, it is the *method* Durkheim uses in this text, and his claim that cultural elements are fundamental to understanding and analysing *all* social formations, which are important. The method and type of analysis which Durkheim used in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is one which can be seen as in broad respects 'structuralist'. To see what this claim entails, I want to discuss briefly the roots of structuralism in two other authors — Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Their work affects how we might read Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* now, towards the end of the twentieth century.

Saussure introduced an important distinction in the way in which language could be studied and, by extension, the ways in which culture more broadly might be approached. He distinguished between two levels of language: language as a social institution, with its own structures, independent of the individual; and language as used and spoken by an individual user. He termed the social institution of

language *langue*; that is, language as a collective system, with its own grammatical structure. Language in this sense is distinct from any single individual's use of his or her own language in everyday speech or writing, which Saussure termed *parole*. Saussure made the important point that language had to be seen as a social institution and as such was not the creation of an individual speaker. The structure, or system, of a language can also be studied outside of historical changes, for although vocabulary may change as new words are introduced and old ones die away, the grammar and structure of a language remains more stable and can be distinguished from such changes. Saussure called the kind of study of language which freezes change in order to look at structure the *synchronic* study of language, and he called the historical type of study of language *diachronic*. Synchronic means 'occurring at the same time'; diachronic means 'across time'. It is an important distinction of which to be aware in the analysis of culture as a whole, not only of language.

Lévi-Strauss argued that a culture operates 'like a language'. He took from Saussure the idea of language having a given structure; that is, a set of grammatical and other, deeper, rules about how to communicate, which lie below the consciousness of any individual speaker and which are not dependent on individual consciousness of them. Lévi-Strauss applied some of these ideas about language to other cultural items, such as myths, rituals and kinship structures, as we shall see in Section 3.3. There is an important methodological point or claim here — namely that the social scientist should analyse how a structure of any kind operates as a structure before he or she is in a position to know what counts as changes, or variations, *within* a structure and what counts as a change *of* a structure. (For example, a change from an elected Conservative to an elected Labour government would be a change *within* a political structure; a change to a fascist regime, with the abolition of elections, would be a change *of* the structure.)

Synchronic structuralist analysis concentrates in the first instance on change *within* a cultural system of some kind, whether it be a system of myth and ritual, of kinship, of food and cooking and eating patterns, or whatever. We shall turn to changes *of* structures (that is, *diachronic* analysis) in Section 4 of this chapter. In the rest of Section 3 we shall concentrate on the analysis of cultural structures, considered as operating independently of major historical changes.

The analysis which Durkheim provided in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* was not explicitly structuralist — this terminology only entered the discourse of the social sciences after his death. However, the seeds of such an approach are to be found there. The common point of departure which Durkheim and the structuralists share is that both begin from the underlying framework, the classifying systems, the structures of a culture, and both start with an analysis of what Durkheim called 'collective representations'.

3.1 COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tradesmen and missionaries sent back reports to France, Britain, Germany and other European countries about the ways of life of other peoples in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Australasia (see Chapter 6). Many of these reports were not only descriptive accounts, but also contained the emotional and moral responses of the European travellers to these other ways of living. Social science analyses of such societies were not written until anthropologists began the more systematic approach of trying to grasp and describe a particular people's way of living in a more objective, non-judgemental, non-value-laden way.

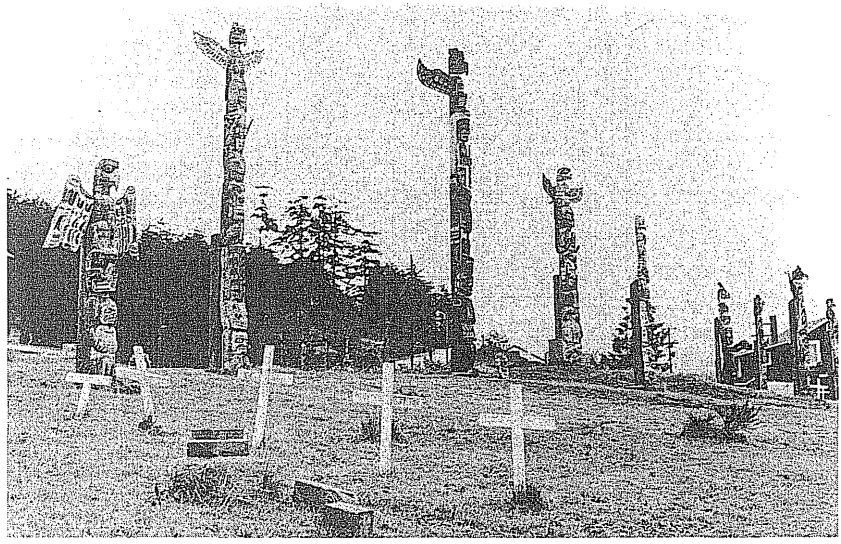
Durkheim used these reports as a basis for his work. He did not visit the Australian aborigines or the Amer-Indian societies about which he wrote. However, the important claims which he made are not, as we shall see, dependent upon being proved right or wrong by empirical data. What his work provides are basic theoretical propositions which formed the foundations for later, more empirical, studies by other anthropologists and sociologists. The strength of Durkheim's analysis lies in the fact that he developed a whole new *approach* to the understanding of culture through his analysis of the religious beliefs and rituals in these societies.

Central to this approach was the concept of *collective representations*. By the term 'representations' Durkheim meant the cultural beliefs, moral values, symbols and ideas shared by any human group. Such cultural components serve as a way of representing the world meaningfully to members of a particular cultural group. It is not a question of asking what it is that such cultural items represent in the outside world, as though there could be true or false representations. Myths, which are literally false, have powerful meanings and real effects. Representations create a symbolic world of meanings within which a cultural group lives. For Durkheim this included such fundamental notions as the particular way time and space are perceived in a culture, as well as its moral and religious beliefs. This approach accepts that different people inhabit different cultures, or symbolic worlds of meaning. It avoids the question of how we, from our western cultural background, would judge which of a set of beliefs and ideas are 'true' or 'false', since this would only tell us what we find acceptable and congruent within our own cultural framework. The issue of the truth or falsehood of different cultural worlds is thus side-stepped by using the concept of 'representations' in a more relativistic, descriptive way.

The cultural values, beliefs, and symbols of a group (its representations) are produced and shared *collectively* by those who are members of the group. Like a language, they are not produced by individuals as a result of their own cultural initiative, as one might say. Indeed, in both pre-literate and modern societies, individuals who produce their own values, beliefs and symbol systems are frequently ostracized by others, treated with hostility, regarded as mad, or tolerated as interesting

eccentrics. In any case, they are not treated as full members of the group, precisely because they do not share its cultural meanings. We learn our cultural group's language, values, beliefs and symbols as we are socialized. Even the basic layers of a person's sense of identity, of who he or she is, is produced by being a member of a specific ethnic, national, or tribal group.

In some pre-literate societies, particular symbols and rituals represent this group belongingness (much as the Union Jack, today, represents being 'British'). Among Australian aborigines and American indians, for example, the emblem of the collectivity may be an animal, bird or plant — what is called the *totem* of the group. Even today, at international sporting occasions, the flag of the country from which the winner comes is raised and its national anthem is played — a ritual which helps to establish and to produce a sense of collective ethnic identity among those who belong to the same group as the winners. Thus, national flags, like other totemic emblems, are major ways in which collectivities, tribes, ethnic groups, or nations represent for themselves and others a sense of their identity, of who they are, collectively. They are 'collective representations' — collectively shared elements of a culture which provide points of symbolic identification for a given group. They represent what the group shares in common; and they help to mark off one group from another.



A totem: a 'collective representation' of a totemic group

Durkheim's theory of culture starts from this claim that the major symbolic components of culture are *representations* which are *collectively* produced, reproduced, transmitted and transformed. The notion of collective representations is, therefore, the foundation of both Durkheim's approach to culture and the claim, made by structuralists, that cultural symbols are central to all sociology and social anthropology.

Durkheim included in his definition of collective representations even such general conceptions as time, space, personality and number. They provide the broad frameworks within which the social cultural life, the shared language and symbolic representations of human groups, are organized. Their existence does not require reference to some abstract cause such as 'reason' or 'God'. Durkheim argued that this insight into the necessarily *social* nature of meanings could dissolve, or resolve, the older problems which philosophy had encountered in trying to give a satisfactory account of how forms of knowledge arose. This important claim is made in the extract from *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* which is reproduced as Reading A, 'Collective representations'.

ACTIVITY 1

You should now read **Reading A, 'Collective representations'**, by Émile Durkheim (which you will find at the end of this chapter). As you read, keep the following questions in mind:

1 What were the main examples of 'categories of understanding' which, according to Durkheim, philosophers since Aristotle have argued lie at the root of our intellectual life?

2 What are the two main doctrines which account for the 'categories of understanding'?

3 What is Durkheim's suggested solution to the problem of how we are to account for the 'categories of understanding'? Write down in a few words the main aspects of the solution Durkheim offers.

How did you get on? Durkheim is claiming here that even the most basic categories of thought, such as ideas of time, space, number and causation, are also collective representations — socially shared frameworks within which individual experience is classified. These social categories of thought form the backbone — the symbolic structures — of any culture. As Durkheim says: 'They are like the solid frame which encloses all thought.' Such frameworks have been accounted for by traditional philosophers as being *either* part of innate reason, in-built at birth, and known *a priori* or independently of experience (rationalism); *or* as something worked out by the individual from empirical observations (empiricism). Durkheim however argues that reason cannot be a purely individual construction, for then it could not provide a common standard of judgement. For Durkheim, the notion of 'reason' implies some socially shared standards of what is to count as a good, well-reasoned argument.

Durkheim rejects both the rationalist and the empiricist accounts of our basic categories of thought. He argues that the fundamental categories we need in order to think systematically and rationally are socially — that is, collectively — produced. Society is a reality of a unique kind, what Durkheim calls a reality '*sui generis*', and this enables groups to achieve more than individuals alone are able to accomplish.

Indeed, he maintains that it is necessary to assert the discontinuity between these two realms: the societal and the individual. Hence the importance of 'collective representations'. Collective representations enable individual people to think. But they are produced at the level of the collective. We learn them as we learn our group's language. Language is also inherently social, or collective — an idea Durkheim suggests elsewhere in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* though he did not develop it as fully as later linguistic philosophers did.

How does this idea of 'collective representations' work within a culture? Durkheim's answer is that they provide the categories, the basic frameworks, into which different items of a culture are classified. Classification schemes tell us which things belong together and which things are different. They help us to 'map out' or make sense of the world. Durkheim first studied this process of cultural classification in so-called 'primitive' societies.

3.2 PRIMITIVE CLASSIFICATION

Early in the twentieth century, anthropologists were struck by the way in which the cultures of pre-literate societies frequently contained complex systems for classifying animals, people, plants, and objects of many kinds. Within these classification systems, particular plants, animals, or objects (i.e. *totems*) were also associated with or used to represent particular groups, clans or tribes. The classification system thus showed which totem belonged with which group, and so helped to establish a collective sense of identity amongst all the members of a particular clan. It also served to establish the boundary between that group and other groups, represented by different totemic objects. Totems were thus a key part of classificatory systems in many primitive, or pre-literate, cultures. Totemic systems provided a sort of classificatory map of the society.

Such cultures were socially organized around complex patterns of kinship. Indeed, kinship was their principal form of social organization. Kinship told members of these societies who was related to whom, who they could and could not marry, who should inherit property, and who their 'enemies' were. Kinship in this context meant wider sets of relations than the immediate family of grandparents, parents, and children, which is how we classify kin relations in western societies. Kinship groups would certainly include not only aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters, but also people who in the West would not count as blood relations at all, and therefore would not be regarded as part of the kinship network.

These 'extra' members of kinship groups — extra that is from a western cultural perspective — were classified as being related because they were members of the same totemic group. Totemic group membership was created, in part, by taking part in a major ritual of some kind.

Classifying kinship according to a system had real consequences because it organized and regulated social behaviour. Table 5.1 shows the classificatory system printed in the old Church of England Prayer Book, which specifies where marriage is permitted, and where it is taboo, in relation to the kinship system. In pre-literate societies, such tables of kindred and affinity obviously could not be written down. Some people in the tribe or clan would retain this knowledge in their heads. Totemic emblems, and the complex classification patterns they involved, may therefore have acted as an *aides-mémoire* for those who had to remember whom a man or a woman were permitted to marry. These cultures contained no modern biological knowledge about human genetics, which we in the West sometimes imagine underpins our kinship system. Such controls over marriage partners pre-date modern medical and genetic knowledge. They are to do with something other than genetics.

Table 5.1 The 'Table of Kindred and Affinity' from the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer

A TABLE OF KINDRED AND AFFINITY

Wherein whosoever are related are forbidden by the Church of England to marry together

A Man may not marry his	*A Woman may not marry her*
Mother	Father
Daughter	Son
Father's mother	Father's father
Mother's mother	Mother's father
Son's daughter	Son's son
Daughter's daughter	Daughter's son
Sister	Brother
Father's daughter	Father's son
Mother's daughter	Mother's son
Wife's mother	Husband's father
Wife's daughter	Husband's son
Father's wife	Mother's husband
Son's wife	Daughter's husband
Father's father's wife	Father's mother's husband
Mother's father's wife	Mother's mother's husband
Wife's father's mother	Husband's father's father
Wife's mother's mother	Husband's mother's father
Wife's son's daughter	Husband's son's son
Son's son's wife	Husband's daughter's son
Daughter's son's wife	Son's daughter's husband
Father's sister	Daughter's daughter's husband
Mother's sister	Father's brother
Brother's daughter	Mother's brother
Sister's daughter	Brother's son
	Sister's son.

THE END

The analysis of classification systems, for Durkheim, like the analysis of symbolic structures for Lévi-Strauss, was fundamental to all cultural analysis. Lévi-Strauss argued that the process of classification replicated the way in which the human brain operates — in terms of pairs. Things arranged or divided into twos, or pairs, are easy for humans to remember. Lévi-Strauss pointed out that in pre-literate cultures, and we might add in modern cultures too, such pairs usually appear as opposed

in some way to each other. Thus, we have oppositions such as the following: hot/cold; cooked/raw; sour/sweet; wet/dry; solid/liquid; earth/air; the city/the country, etc. You can see from this list how fundamental this division into 'binary opposites' is to meaning. We know what 'cooked' means because it is the opposite of 'raw'. The pairs work in relation to one another. One fundamental pair is male/female. This is fundamental in that it both operates as a basis for marriage and sexual reproduction and provides human cultures with a general model, based on sexual difference, for thinking in terms of pairs of differences. Some languages, such as French, have feminine and masculine words for objects in the world, for example.

However, not everything people experience or observe fits into the paired or opposed categories which a particular classification system provides: for example, fog or mist are neither earth nor air, but something 'in between'. Fog is neither solid nor fully liquid, neither fully dark nor fully light. It cross-cuts our categories, our classificatory system, at a number of points. This lack of fit may be why fog or mist can be used to suggest something spooky, eerie, mysterious, threatening — a quality which has been used in many novels, films and television programmes in our culture. Honey and other sticky, gooey substances also fail to fit into the categories of liquid or solid, as do some body fluids from the nose or throat. Phlegm, or mucus from the nose are substances which are difficult to classify as either hard or soft, solids or liquids, even as innocent or harmful.

Lévi-Strauss called this basic principle of paired oppositions which lies behind all classificatory systems *binary oppositions*. The term was derived from the basic way in which computer languages operate — either there is an electrical current flowing or there is not (which can be indicated by a plus or minus sign, or dots and dashes, long or short signals, etc.). The important point here for Lévi-Strauss is that this binary way of thinking is not only found in so-called primitive societies. What Lévi-Strauss called 'the savage mind' (i.e. thinking by classifying things into binary opposites) can also be found at the heart of the culture of modern, advanced societies.

There is one very fundamental binary opposition which is found in both pre-literate societies and, in a related but different form, in modern societies. Durkheim formulated it in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* as a basic classification of all culture: the division of things into 'the sacred' and 'the profane'.

The sacred, as Durkheim defined it, is *not* based upon a belief in supernatural entities, which others had used as a definition of religion. Some sacred activities were not dependent on supernatural beliefs, he claimed, as for example in some forms of Buddhism. The central dichotomy in pre-literate cultures, Durkheim claimed, was to be understood as separating those things, times, places, persons, animals, birds, stones, trees, rivers, mountains, plants or liquids which were *set apart* (sacred) from *routine* (profane) uses in everyday activities. The

sacred, he argued, is a fundamental category in such cultures. The distinction between the sacred and the profane involves both *beliefs*, which define what is classified as sacred in a culture, and *rituals* which actively *set apart* particular elements, times, people or places (the *negative* rites).

Negative rites, which set apart the sacred, can be actions, such as keeping vigil before a feast, being nude, being celibate, wearing special costumes, or using body-paint. Some are very severe, in the eyes of Western observers: examples include being buried under smouldering leaves overnight before young males are made full 'men' in a special ritual; circumcision; cuts on the face, or body; gashes on limbs; cutting veins; or being beaten by elders. All these are instances of often painful negative rituals which serve to set apart some time period, or some person or group, before being brought into positive contact with sacred things.

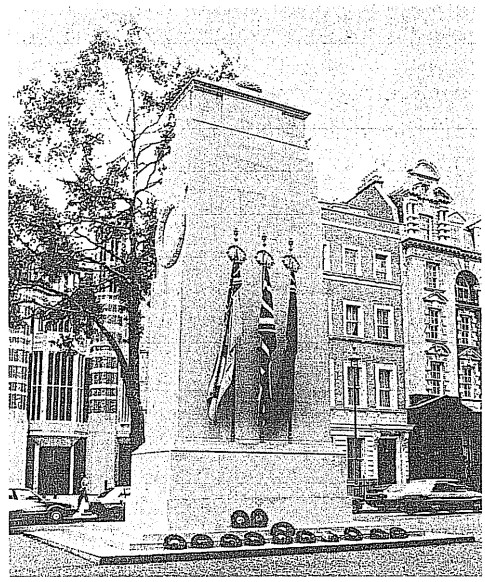
Positive rites, on the other hand, include any action which brings a person, or a group, into contact with sacred objects, places, people, spaces, animals or birds. They may involve the parading of the totemic emblem of a group (as in the example of the flags as emblems of national groups mentioned above). They may also involve eating or drinking some component from the totemic emblem — part of a bird or animal, or body substances from animals or people, such as blood, milk, urine or faeces. In later forms of cultural practices than those of totemism, these positive rituals may become more *symbolic*; as, for example, taking bread and wine symbolizes eating the flesh and blood of Jesus, in the communion rites of modern Christianity.

The experiences people have in their rituals are not based on something unreal, Durkheim argued, but upon a real force greater than, and operating outside of, the individual. But what is this force? Given the great variety of gods or spirits in which the members of different cultures have believed, it cannot simply be that they have all contacted the same god or spirit. Durkheim argued that, since 'the unanimous sentiment of the believers of all times cannot be purely illusory' (Durkheim, 1961, p.464), therefore the objective cause of the sensations of such people is not some supernatural being but *society* itself. In summarizing his long, complex argument on this point, Durkheim concluded *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* with the following statement of his sociological explanation for the existence, and indeed the persistence, of religions in human societies:

> ... we have seen that this reality, which mythologies have represented under so many different forms, but which is the universal and eternal objective cause of these sensations *sui generis* out of which religious experience is made, is society. ... society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself ...
> (Durkheim, 1961, pp.465–6)

This is how Durkheim formulates his major claim that religious experience is not based upon illusions, but upon concrete social, collective, ritual actions or practices. Participants in such rituals (a wedding ceremony, for instance) are involved in a set of practices, often including eating a ceremonial meal, which bind them together into a collective. The wider cultural group's *values* are also affirmed in such rituals — how a husband and wife should live and how they should raise their children are often explicitly, or implicitly, articulated in marriage rites in modern Christianity. The force which people feel in such circumstances is the moral pressure arising from this belongingness, or social solidarity.

Similar rituals are still found in modern industrial societies. But there are a multiplicity of ethnic groups, religious groups, and socio-economic classes in such societies who do not share a single set of meanings, values or beliefs. These kinds of societies have had to devise other rituals at the level of the nation-state in order to try to cement these divergent groups together. In Britain, the royal family, ceremonial occasions, even national emergencies like war, are major components in performing this task of binding diverse groups together into some sense of being part of a united society — with varying degrees of success.



The Cenotaph is a sacred place in the centre of London, used for the ritual commemorating of those killed in the wars

The distinction between the profane and the sacred was called by Durkheim an elementary form of 'primitive classification'. That means not only a classification which is found in pre-literate societies, but one which is fundamental, primal, basic, to all human cultures. All social formations will have some beliefs, values, symbols and rituals which are sacred or set apart from profane, everyday life. Even communist states in the twentieth century, whose regimes were explicitly against

organized religion, nevertheless surrounded themselves with flags, parades, creeds and ceremonials — the symbols and rituals of rulers.

3.3 STRUCTURALIST DEVELOPMENTS

We have seen, then, how the structuralist's concern with analysing the symbolic structure of events was rooted in Durkheim's work on collective representations and primitive classification systems. (Durkheim had worked with the anthropologist Marcel Mauss in a study of *Primitive Classification* (1903).) Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist who worked in South America, applied the principle of binary opposites as a central feature of all classifying systems to a wide variety of cultural phenomena. He studied the *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), the totemic systems of pre-literate societies (*Totemism,* 1962*)*, the myths of South American peoples (in *The Raw and the Cooked,* (1970), *Honey and Ashes* (1973)), and a variety of other anthropological phenomena (in *The Savage Mind* (1962) and *Structural Anthropology* (1958)). In all of these studies he applied the basic structuralist method of analysis. The object of analysis was, as it were, frozen in time (synchronic), so that its symbolic structure could be analysed. The structure was analysed in terms of how its different elements were classified and arranged, how the principle of 'binary opposition' (and the mediating categories which fitted neither sides of the binary) worked. What mattered was the *relations between* the different elements in the classifying system (remember the positions at the wedding feast?). The *meaning* of each pattern or structure was 'read' in terms of what it told us about the culture. The underlying 'code' (e.g. the kinship system) provided the analyst with a way of deciphering the phenomenon.

Such a structuralist method can be applied to any cultural pattern, regardless of the historical period in which it may be found. What we think of as 'primitive' ways of thinking may be found both among Australian aborigines and in modern cultures. A British anthropologist, Mary Douglas, writing in the 1960s, has used a structuralist method to analyse the rules governing pollution. In the extract in Reading B, she compares rules governing food in India with western ideas about hygiene.

ACTIVITY 2 Now read **Reading B, 'Hygiene and pollution'**, by Mary Douglas. You should note that the Havik are a group of Hindu Brahmins, priestly scholars, and as such are very high in the caste system.

As you read the extract from Mary Douglas, have a pen and paper to hand and try to answer the following questions:

1 What kinds of food can pass on pollution, according to Havik rules?

2 What is the key word Mary Douglas analyses from western culture to suggest the idea of pollution?

3 What are the two main differences between contemporary European ideas of pollution and those of primitive cultures?

4 How does Douglas use the ideas (derived from Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss) of *classification*?

Mary Douglas suggests that there are significant *continuities* in notions of pollution, taboo, and ritual rules, especially about food and drinks, body substances, and clothing, between traditional and modern cultures, in spite of the development of modern science. The reactions to AIDS among westerners, some newspapers labelling it the 'gay plague', illustrates that pollution ideas have not disappeared from modern cultures.

We have been looking at a particular method of analysis of culture. The method can be applied to a variety of components of a culture, from language to rituals, from cooking and types of food eaten to fundamental categories of thought, such as space, time and causation. All these diverse cultural phenomena can be analysed as structures, which arrange and order perceptions and regulate actions among those who share the same cultural frameworks, the same way of 'classifying' the world. The method is applicable in the broad area which may be termed 'the symbolic'. According to this conception of culture, tiny things — small differences between the way in which food is prepared and eaten, for instance — may be used to mark or symbolize a cultural difference between groups, between who is a member and who is an outsider. Different dietary habits, for example, mark major differences between national groups, and mobilize powerful feelings of solidarity or hostility, similarity and difference.

4 CULTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

So far we have been looking at culture in terms of a structural arrangement, which carries a cultural meaning or provides us with a clue as to the cultural codes and symbolic systems of classification which form the frameworks of meaning in a particular society. Essentially, as we have noted, this approach is *synchronic*. History, movement, action seem to be omitted. Thus, we know which objects in a society are classified 'sacred', which 'profane'. But this approach is not so good at telling us how changes in such cultural phenomena occur — for example, how the 'sacred' might decline, or change, when Christian missionaries arrive. On a larger canvas, it is not so good at the sort of *diachronic* analysis which would tell us, for example, what role culture played historically in the transition of European societies from feudalism to early capitalism, from a traditional to a modern form of society. And yet some of the great figures in classical sociology have argued that, contrary to conventional opinion, what we call *culture* did

play an enormously significant role — even, perhaps, served as one of the main causal factors — in the historical transition to modernity. It is certainly the case that one of the principal ways of characterizing that transition is in terms of the move from a society in which religion pervaded every aspect of social life (a religious or 'sacred' culture, we might say) to the much more secular (or 'profane') culture, dominated by materialistic and technological values, which is to be found in modern, advanced industrial societies today. How are we to understand and analyse this process of *secularization* which is typical of the formation of modern culture?

This process of cultural change has been characterized by the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) as *the civilizing process* (in two volumes published just before the Second World War called *The Civilizing Process* (1939)). This term takes us back to the second definition of culture discussed in Section 2. Elias attributes the process of pacification of medieval society to the development of individual, moral forms of restraint and control. He analyses these by studying the spread of social codes of behaviour, such as table manners and etiquette. Elias also points out how this process had been accompanied by the emergence of the state as a system of social regulation. The modern state assisted the development of *internal* peace through its monopoly control over the means of violence. Somewhat surprisingly, Elias sees the modern state's control over the means of violence in a given territory as also aiding the growth of 'civilization', which required a new individual sense of, and capacity for, self-restraint. Elias was drawing here upon the ideas of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) in developing his view of the conditions necessary for modern 'civilization'.

Max Weber had indeed emphasized the modern state's control over the means of violence, but his more significant contribution in this context was his extensive analysis of the role of cultural values and religious beliefs in the development of western capitalism. Weber was writing at about the same time as Durkheim wrote *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* but his approach is very different, and provides us with a different methodology for analysing culture. Weber is much less concerned with the formal practices and rules of symbolic classification and much more concerned with the role which values play in major historical transitions. Above all, the question which preoccupied Weber was this: how did capitalism, the economic system which underpins 'modernity', arise and what part did religious values play in that evolution?

4.1 RELIGION AND THE RISE OF CAPITALISM

Weber was not a structuralist — indeed the method did not emerge in an explicit form in the social sciences in Weber's lifetime. Nevertheless, his work can also be seen to depend upon a series of binary oppositions which he used to *classify* types of capitalism and types of cultural symbols, though this has not often been remarked upon by

contemporary sociologists. For example, Weber distinguished between what he called 'adventurer capitalism' and 'rational, peaceable, bourgeois capitalism'. 'Adventurer' capitalism was based upon the use of conquest and violence, to extract profits. This was the predominant form during the European acquisition of colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the use of slavery in the Americas.

The second type, 'bourgeois capitalism', was based upon rational action, and non-violent means of exploiting labour. Weber argued that this new type of capitalism had emerged from a set of cultural values based on the notion of a vocation — that is, a calling from God. This was not like God's call to the Catholic priest to *leave* the world, but a calling which influenced behaviour *in* the world.

Monks had been *ascetics* but in roles *removed* from worldly affairs

Thus, as Weber wrote:

> One of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism, and not only of that but of all modern culture: rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the calling, was born ... from the spirit of Christian asceticism. ...
>
> The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of the monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order.
> (Weber, 1971, pp.180–1)

Why does Weber attribute the rise of capitalism to the spirit of Christian asceticism? To grasp Weber's argument, we must look, first, at the distinction he makes between these two types of capitalism, and then at the role which the concepts of 'rational' and 'asceticism' play in his analysis.

Capitalism, in the sense of profitable economic activity, had existed for a very long time, and in many different societies. But only in Western Europe, from about the sixteenth century, was capitalism in its rational, modern form to be found on any extended scale. Here, 'capitalism is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever *renewed* by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise' (Weber, 1971, p.17).

What Weber called 'peaceable, bourgeois capitalism' is the predominant form which this development took in Europe (though exactly how 'peaceful' the transition to it was in reality has been a subject of debate amongst historians). It developed as conditions for peaceful trade and production, stimulated by profit, expanded. (Weber's analysis of the rise of capitalism was briefly discussed in Chapter 4.)

Now, an economic system driven by self-interest, the desire to maximize profit on a regular basis, to accumulate, invest and expand wealth, seems to require a very materialistic set of values — the very opposite of the religious culture which predated the rise of capitalism in Western Europe. Thus, we are not surprised to discover that, as capitalism developed and expanded, so cultural values became increasingly *secularized*: that is, more concerned with the material world and less with the spiritual world, more preoccupied with attaining wealth in *this* world than with salvation in the next. Religion of course remains an active cultural force in capitalist societies, but it is confined to a smaller area of social life and is more restricted in its appeal as compared with the cultural universe in the societies of feudal Europe dominated by the Catholic faith. Secularization appears to be the major process affecting culture in the transition to modern capitalist societies.

However, the paradox which Weber develops in his work (especially *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*) is that *religion* played an absolutely critical role in the formation of early capitalism. Modern rational capitalism could not have emerged, he argues, without the mediation of religious culture, especially that variant associated with the Calvinist puritan sects of the seventeenth century. It was the 'Protestant ethic' which helped to produce capitalism as a *distinctive* type of profit-making involving economic action based upon *sustained, systematic capital investment*, and employing *formally free labour* (not slavery). Weber wrote:

> ... the Occident [West] has developed capitalism both to a quantitative extent, and (carrying this quantitative development) in types, forms, and directions which have never existed elsewhere. All over the world there have been merchants, wholesale and retail, local and engaged in foreign trade. Loans of all kinds have been

> made, and there have been banks with the most various functions, at least comparable to ours of, say, the sixteenth century. ... This kind of entrepreneur, the capitalistic adventurer, has existed everywhere. With the exception of trade and credit and banking transactions, their activities were predominantly of an irrational and speculative character, or directed to acquisition by force, above all the acquisition of booty ... by exploitation of subjects.
>
> The capitalism of promoters, large-scale speculators, concession hunters, and much modern financial capitalism even in peace time, but, above all, the capitalism especially concerned with exploiting wars, bears this stamp even in modern Western countries, and some, but only some, parts of large-scale international trade are closely related to it, to-day as always.
>
> But in modern times the Occident has developed, in addition to this, a very different form of capitalism which has appeared nowhere else: the rational capitalistic organization of (formally) free labour.
> (Weber, 1971, pp.20–1)

Weber placed considerable emphasis on the role of *rationality* in the formation of early capitalism. What characterized 'bourgeois' capitalists was that they did not spend all the profits at once in immediate pleasures and luxurious living. Capitalists had learned the habits of thrift, of saving over a long period, so that they could (as in the parable of the talents in the Bible) put money to good use: in short they learned to accumulate and to invest. They also learned how to calculate whether their activities yielded a profit in the long run, or were making a loss, just as they constantly 'reckoned up' how well they were doing in the pursuit of salvation. In short, the capitalist learned to organize economic behaviour (like religious life) in regular, systematic, long-term, instrumental ways for the purpose of increasing wealth; that is, *rationally* maximizing profit. This adaption of means (of economic action) to secure certain ends (profits) represented, in essence, a *rationalization* of the whole sphere of economic behaviour, without which the sober, thrifty capitalist entrepreneur and the rationally-organized capitalist enterprise could never have come into existence.

But how did such a figure as the 'bourgeois capitalist' first arise? What inner compulsions converted the spendthrift feudal landlord into the sober, respectable capitalist? How were these new cultural values formed? How was a 'culture of capitalism' or 'capitalist spirit' created? Weber's surprising answer is that it was created through the compulsions of a certain type of *religious asceticism*. His argument was that some moral force had to compel the new capitalist entrepreneur to forego immediate pleasures and short-term gratifications in the interests of the *rational* pursuit of profitable enterprise in the long run. In other words, far from capitalism emerging because of a *loss* of religious values, the presence of a certain type of religious culture was *necessary to* its formation. But which type of religious culture best provided the

The Calvinist was an *ascetic* who worked *within* the world

seedbed for this new spirit of capitalist enterprise? Not Catholicism, Weber believed, since it allowed men and women to pursue pleasure, provided they confessed, repented and sought forgiveness from the Church. It did not create a tough enough personal inner conscience to drive the capitalist into sober, rational, entrepreneurial activity. So Weber turned to Protestantism.

There were basically two types of Protestantism: that which believed that a person could work for salvation by doing good deeds in the world; and that variant which believed that the decision as to who would be saved and who damned was God's alone and that people had to live their lives as spiritually as possible, watching their every action in the hope of salvation, but never knowing whether they were among God's 'elect' or not. It seems obvious that Weber would have chosen the version which stressed 'doing good in the world' as the seedbed of capitalist worldly activity. But in fact he chose the latter, the Calvinist Puritanism, which believed in predestination and the arbitrary will of God, as the most likely candidate. Why? Because, according to Calvinism, the individual could not depend on the Church for salvation but was constantly and directly under the stern eye of God. Not knowing whether 'he' (for most early capitalists were men) would be saved or not created:

1 a powerful inner compulsion (conscience) to order 'his' life in the rational pursuit of salvation; and

2 a permanent state of 'unsettledness', never knowing the outcome, which kept 'him' on the straight and narrow path, prevented any backsliding, and drove him forward relentlessly.

Calvinism, Weber argued, was the type of religious asceticism which helped to form the inner character of the entrepreneurs who pioneered the transition to early capitalism. This was the link which Weber constructed between 'the Protestant ethic' and the 'spirit of capitalism'.

4.2 ORIENTATIONS OF THE WORLD RELIGIONS

To understand why Weber fastened on asceticism as a key component of the Protestant ethic, we need to know something more about how he classified or built a *typology* of the different world religions and the cultures which they produced.

Weber's work on the world religions is pitched at a global and comparative level of analysis. He wrote about Chinese, Indian and Jewish cultures as well as the culture of Western Europe. Unfortunately, he produced no full text on Islamic culture, but his writing on the Middle East is extensive. Each of these cultures was based upon what he called a 'world religion'.

Weber argued that the major world cultures and their religions can be classified according to the main attitudes or orientations which each fosters towards three aspects of the world:

1 The world of nature — soils, animals, plants, rivers, seas, fish, trees, etc.
2 Other people — who may be seen as sub-humans, inferiors, as slightly different, or as equals.
3 The body — the human body, a person's own body, which is not just another part of nature, but is usually seen as being 'special'.

Here, Weber can be seen using the method of classificatory systems and binary oppositions as a way of contrasting the cultures generated by the world religions. He contrasts Oriental (eastern) religions (Confucianism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism) with Occidental (western) religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). There was a major thrust in the oriental cultures (in China and India especially) towards seeking *harmony with* the natural world, other people, and the body. This set of attitudes, or value-orientations, contrasts with those found in the cultures of the 'Middle East', in Persia, Palestine, Arabia and North Africa, where the main thrust of the religious culture was towards seeking *mastery over* the world of nature, other people and the body. The first type of orientation Weber called 'mysticism' (seeking *harmony* with); the second 'asceticism' (seeking *mastery* over).

Weber also made use of another 'binary opposition' — that between 'inner-wordly' and 'other-wordly' religious orientations. What he had in mind here were the specialist types of roles which developed for leaders (or what he called the 'virtuosi') in different religions — those with a

special gift for practising the meditative techniques of religion and those who carried high social esteem, honour and prestige. Unfortunately the way Weber's terminology has been translated into English has proved very confusing. 'Inner-worldly' suggest turning away from the world and becoming preoccupied with one's inner spiritual life. For Weber, it meant exactly the opposite. It meant turning *in towards* the world. It is important to bear this point in mind. 'Other worldly' refers to those roles which are removed from everyday tasks — such as the monk, nun, priest, scholar, artist or intellectual. 'Inner-worldly' refers to those roles which carry high honour and esteem *in* the world: merchant, politician, ruler, army general or naval officer.

The two distinctions can be combined to produce four possible types of social role which may be given the highest social esteem within a specific society. The four types are shown in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Four types of religious orientation according to Weber

Direction of religion:	Orientations of esteemed roles:	
	Inner-worldly	Other-worldly or world-rejecting
Mysticism	1	2
Asceticism	3	4

By combining the two sets of distinctions, we can identify four positions or types of religious orientation.

Type 1 Inner-worldly mysticism — Hinduism; Taoism; Confucianism.

Type 2 Other-worldly mysticism — Buddhism; Sufism.

Type 3 Inner-worldly asceticism — Calvinism.

Type 4 Other-worldly asceticism — Catholicism; some popular forms of Islam; Orthodox Judaism.

The important example in the typology, so far as the transition to capitalism is concerned, is Type 3. 'Inner-worldly ascetic' religion produced a culture whose central values were:

1 seeking mastery over the natural world;
2 seeking mastery over other people who are seen as being prone to sinfulness, wickedness, sensuality and laziness;
3 seeking mastery over the self — by controlling impulses to the sensual enjoyment of bodily experiences arising from wearing fine clothes, make-up, or perfumes, consuming good food and wine, or other alcoholic drinks, and above all sexual pleasure, both inside and outside marriage.

Weber claimed that this set of cultural values had emerged *uniquely* from the later forms of Calvinism in the late 1500s and early 1600s, especially among Puritan groups in Britain, Holland and New England

where early capitalism took firm root. The religious culture of inner-worldly asceticism had provided the seedbed for the formation the 'rational spirit' of modern capitalism.

Weber acknowledged that other material, technological, economic and financial conditions needed to be fulfilled for modern, rational, bourgeois capitalism to become a possibility. Many non-European civilizations had come close to producing these material factors — Chinese, Indian, and Arab civilizations for example, were highly developed technologically and economically, long before many parts of Europe. However, these other civilizations had not developed modern forms of capitalism, although they conducted trade for profit. Weber argued that the critical feature which these other cultures lacked was the cultural values which would have enabled rational capitalism to develop.

Many of the major world religions were not compatible with the way of life which rational capitalism imposed upon culture. Traditional religions were difficult or impossible to practise faithfully in the new conditions created by modern capitalism. On the other hand, Weber also became convinced that scientific and technological values, which increasingly dominated modern capitalism, could not resolve the problem of values — of *how* we ought to live.

Science, and modern capitalism, were both aspects of a long historical process which Weber claimed was going on in western culture. This was a process in which *rationality* — the instrumental adaptation of means to ends — came to dominate more and more areas of life in western cultures. We shall examine this process in Section 4.3 of this chapter.

4.3 WESTERN CULTURE, SCIENCE AND VALUES

Other world cultures — notably Chinese, Egyptian and Islamic cultures — had made notable scientific discoveries. But Western culture was unique in that it had developed modern science to an unprecedented degree. This process had begun in earnest with the Enlightenment, as you saw in Chapter 1. Weber wrote in his Introduction to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

> A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value.
>
> Only in the West does a science exist at a stage of development which we recognize today as valid. Empirical knowledge, reflection on problems of the cosmos and of life, philosophical and theological wisdom of the most profound sort, are not confined to it, though in the case of the last the full development of a

> systematic theology must be credited to Christianity under the influence of Hellenism, since there were only fragments in Islam and in a few Indian sects.
> (Weber, 1971, p.13)

One of the major distinctive characteristics of modern western culture, then, was its scientific character and the prestige it attached to 'the scientific'. Other world cultures developed empirical knowledge, but this is not the same thing as theoretically organized science. They also contained complex philosophical and theological reflections, although these, Weber claimed, reached a higher level of development in Ancient Greece and in mediaeval Europe than elsewhere. Notice, however, Weber's questioning attitude to the supposed 'universal significance and value' of science in the above extract. Here is another formulation which Weber gave to his concerns about science:

> Science has created a cosmos of natural causality and has seemed unable to answer with certainty the question of its own ultimate presuppositions. Nevertheless science, in the name of 'intellectual integrity', has come forward with the claim of representing the only possible form of a reasoned view of the world ... something has adhered to this cultural value which was bound to depreciate it with still greater finality, namely, senselessness ... all 'culture' appears as man's emancipation from the organically prescribed cycle of natural life. For this reason culture's every step forward seems condemned to lead to an ever more devastating senselessness. The advancement of cultural values, however, seems to become a senseless hustle in the service of worthless, moreover self-contradictory, and mutually antagonistic ends.
> (Weber, 1970, pp.355–7)

There is an even more questioning or pessimistic tone in this passage. Developing scientific rationality, Weber seems to be saying, absorbing more and more of social life into its domain, leads not to the 'emancipation' which the Enlightenment hoped for, but to 'a senseless hustle in the service of worthless, ... self-contradictory, ... antagonistic ends'.

During the period in which Weber was writing, this pessimistic assessment of the Enlightenment faith in reason and science became more widespread. The philosopher Nietzche (1844–1900), and the nihilists, for example, began to argue that there were no grounds for making claims for any moral or political values which everyone could accept. By the late nineteenth century, many writers came to believe that western civilization had fallen into a state of cultural crisis. It was a 'civilization' only in the sense of being technologically advanced, especially in its industrial production processes. However, in the sphere of moral philosophy and values, European 'civilization' had become nihilistic — it had nothing positive to say.

This pessimistic analysis, and its implications, underpinned Weber's comparative sociology of the world cultures and their relation to political and economic change.

5 THE COSTS OF CIVILIZATION

Bryan Turner has recently argued that an essential feature of Weber's view of modernity is its ambiguity: 'Modernization brings with it the erosion of meaning, the endless conflict of polytheistic values, and the threat of the iron cage of bureaucracy. Rationalization makes the world orderly and reliable, but it cannot make the world meaningful' (Turner, 1990, p.6).

5.1 INCREASING RATIONALITY

The rise of science and technology, the growth of western capitalism as a 'rational' form of economic life, and of a political culture rooted in legal-rational laws or rules and procedure — all came to be seen as part of a wider process going on in western cultures: the process Weber called 'the increasing rationalization of more and more areas of life' (Weber, 1970). He made no distinction here between capitalism and socialism, both of which, he believed, led to an increasingly rational ordering of work, of the economic distribution of goods and services, and of social life in general. Both were in tension with more traditional cultures,where religion was the central component which formed ordinary people's attitudes and values.

The growth of bureaucracy as a form of organization in *both* capitalism and socialism was, for Weber, another source of evidence of the growing rationalization of modern culture. Bureaucracies were established as a means of achieving, in practice, values of *justice* (law courts) and *equality* (national insurance, for example). So modern cultures had derived considerable gains from the increasing rationality of social organization. But there were costs here too, when one compared modern societies with more traditional ones.

One strength of traditional cultures, as Weber saw it, lay in the fact that they offered people what he called 'a solution to the problem of theodicy' (Weber, 1970). That is to say, they provided ways of explaining and justifying the ways of God to man (theodicies). In particular, they provided an answer to one of the most perplexing of human dilemmas — the moral problem of suffering. Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why do children and other innocent people, who wish no harm to others, suffer? Weber argued that every culture should provide some answer or explanation to such existential questions. The role of culture was to give meaning to, or help people make sense of, life (Weber's whole sociological approach was directed towards the study of action which was 'meaningful', or to which

meaning could be given). The persistence of traditional cultures, he thought, could be explained in this way: their religious dimension did offer some way of handling these deep questions of human existence.

In order to become established and to persist over time in a culture, theodicies had to make sense to two groups of people:

1 The intellectuals, and scholars, who could read or write in literate cultures, or who were the priests, medicine men, shamans, or witch doctors — the 'keepers of tribal and religious wisdom' — in pre-literate societies.

2 The main classes and strata in the rest of society — including the main property owners, small business and trading classes, farmers, herdsmen, warriors, peasants, artisans and the urban working class where this had emerged.

Some theodicies, developed by the intellectuals, were popularized by priests, preachers and teachers and, in that form, were picked up by and caught on among wider groups in society. This, Weber argued, is what had happened with Calvinism in the seventeenth century. It caught on among the newly emerging bourgeoisie during early capitalism, because its teaching and doctrine had an 'elective affinity' (i.e. made a neat fit) with the unique social, psychological and cultural needs of the rising class of early entrepreneurs. The term 'elective affinity' was Weber's way of explaining the 'fit' between a socio-economic group, such as a class (e.g. the rising bourgeoisie), its way of life (e.g. the new type of capitalist economic activity), and a specific set of cultural beliefs and values (e.g. Puritanism). The values and beliefs of the 'Protestant ethic' gave meaning to, and helped the early capitalists to make sense of, the new kinds of economic activity in which they were engaging.

One can think of other comparable historical examples. There was an 'elective affinity' between the early industrial working class in British nineteenth-century capitalist society and later versions of Calvinism, like Methodism, which offered the converted a role as the 'elect', the respectable, the chosen few, at a time when they were otherwise feeling excluded from society. Even today, in an advanced industrial capitalist society with a very materialist culture like the United States, about 50 per cent of the population still attend a church service once a month. American culture was deeply influenced by Protestantism, and there is a sizeable Catholic minority (a quarter to a third of all church attenders). So, one could say there is an 'elective affinity' between religion and being an American.

But what about *modern* culture — increasingly secular and materialistic in its values, instrumental rather than spiritual in its outlook and, as Weber said, dominated by scientific and technological rationality? What provides meaning in *this* culture? How do people find an answer to the fundamental problems of life?

The Enlightenment thinkers (as you may recall from Chapter 1) had hoped that science could *replace* religion as a basis for moral values,

and thus provide the foundation for a new culture, a modern civilization. But Weber argued that the problem of meaning, of suffering and justice, *cannot* be satisfactorily addressed by science alone. However, given its relative decline, religion had ceased to provide meaningful solutions. Two areas, Weber believed, had taken on something of the function of religion in modern culture, as a source of meaning and values not yet wholly dominated by technical and scientific rationality: the spheres of the aesthetic and the erotic.

In some traditional cultures (e.g. Hinduism, Sufism and — though Weber did not study them — many African and native American cultures) the religious, the mystical and the erotic (especially in the form of dance and music) were deeply intertwined. However, in the West there has always been a tension between the erotic and religion — in both the Catholic and the Protestant faiths. Catholicism found aesthetic forms more acceptable, but Protestantism in general, and Puritanism in particular, have always been profoundly suspicious of *both* the erotic and the aesthetic. On the other hand, this 'asceticism' (i.e. renunciation of pleasure) was precisely the element in Calvinism which had proved of value to the early capitalists. (The puritans objected to bear-bating, for example, not because of the pain it gave to the bear, but because of the pleasure it gave to the spectators.) It provided that taboo on 'pleasure and gratification' which, Weber argued, compelled capitalists to save, accumulate, and invest, and drove them to adopt a sober and frugal rather than a spendthrift style of life. However, once the 'spirit of capitalism' had developed fully, this 'taboo' on the erotic and the aesthetic created problems, because art and sexuality were two of the few remaining areas of modern culture which had to some extent resisted 'rationalization'.

Weber wrote that :

> ... asceticism descended like a frost on the life of 'Merrie old England'. And not only worldly merriment felt its effect. The Puritan's ferocious hatred of everything which smacked of superstition, of all survivals of magical and sacramental salvation, applied to the Christmas festivities and the May Pole and all spontaneous art. ... The Theatre was obnoxious to the Puritans, and with the strict exclusion of the erotic and of nudity from the realm of toleration, a radical view of either literature or art could not exist. (Weber, 1971, pp.168–9)

Incidentally, this suggests an interesting connection with the second definition of 'culture' (meaning 'the arts') which we discussed in Section 2. In the 1860s, in England, cultural critics like Matthew Arnold believed that, with the decline of religion, literature and art would increasingly play the role of providing the main source of values and standards of judgement, in part because they were somewhat distanced from the imperatives of money-making. In general, the arts celebrate the non-rational — even the irrational — aspects of life. They are not subject to the same rules of evidence and proof as science. Unlike technology, they

lack practical application to 'real life'. They belong with the world of fiction, make-believe, pleasure and play. Though the arts have stood as a symbol of civilization, they have also long been regarded as 'effete' and over-refined (as in the stereotype 'the long-haired artist').

Sexuality and the erotic have something of the same status — both are areas of taboo, set aside from 'normal' daily life, not governed by instrumental calculation, where irrational impulses surface which, many believe, threaten the even tenor of everyday life. Especially outside conventional marriage, the erotic also marks the eruption of non-rational forces — the pleasures, desires and wishes of the body. Weber's argument, in his essay 'The aesthetic and the erotic spheres' (Weber, 1970), is that intellectuals and others caught up in modern rational work processes regard the aesthetic and erotic spheres as important spaces *set aside* (remember Durkheim's notion of 'the sacred'?) from 'normal life' for living for a short time in the non-rational. The underside of the increasing rationalization of life at work, and in organized leisure, is the heightened role of aesthetic and erotic pleasure in industrial, urban social formations. They become privileged zones, places specially charged with emotion and value, the only cultural spaces left where people are still in touch with 'natural forces', in contact with the 'real' — the body, the flesh, desire — and where one can be taken out of everyday, conscious concerns and anxieties. You can see how, paradoxically, according to Weber's argument, not only have the aesthetic and erotic spheres to some extent replaced the role of religion in modern culture; they have also acquired something of the character of what both Durkheim and Weber called 'the sacred'.

However, they could not compensate for the overwhelming tendency of modern culture. Though the values of Puritanism had helped to bring the 'spirit of capitalism' and the rational pursuit of capitalist enterprise into existence, the religious element had long since — in Weber's judgement — given way to a more secular, materialistic culture, in which the processes of rationalization exerted the dominant force. There is no mistaking the note of chilling pessimism in Weber's description of the later stages of this development.

ACTIVITY 3

Now read **Reading C, 'The iron cage'**, by Max Weber, which is the last few paragraphs from *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* It begins by repeating a sentence quoted above in Section 4.1. (Baxter was a Puritan divine who wrote in the late 1670s. He was one of the main sources Weber used for 'the Protestant ethic'.)

After reading the extract, try to answer the following questions:

1 What does Weber mean by the phrase the 'iron cage'?

2 What motivates people to work in modern industrial societies, now that religious asceticism has ceased to do so?

3 Where does Weber identify any chances of escaping from the iron cage?

5.2 DISENCHANTMENT WITH THE MODERN WORLD

Weber's theme of the ever-increasing rationalization of modern life was part of a more general argument that the evolution of modern culture has not produced the increase in overall human happiness that many hoped for. The project, set in motion by the Enlightenment, of increasing progress, wealth and happiness through the application of science and technology, first to industry and then to social life as a whole, and the weakening of the hold of custom, magic, superstition and other supernatural taboos over which the *philosophes* rejoiced, has been put in question. In the traditional culture of Europe before the Protestant Reformation, religion provided the moral framework for everyone. Everyday life was punctuated by saints days, fairs, pilgrimages, festivals, seasons of feasting, atonement and celebration. The culture of ordinary people was saturated with folk customs, magical spells, rituals and religious occasions. Springs and wells provided healing waters, the relics of saints offered safe journeys or protection to relatives and friends.

The gradual disappearance of this culture, saturated with the religious and what would now be regarded as the irrational, and the transition to a world more and more of which could only be understood and explained though the application of rational forms of explanation, mastered and controlled through the application of instrumental reason, was described by Weber as a process of *de-magification*. (The German phrase Weber used, '*Entzauberung der Welt*', is sometimes translated as 'the disenchantment of the world'.) Both are aspects of that long cultural shift towards modernity which many sociologists call *secularization*.

Weber was by no means the only social scientist or social critic and philosopher to take an increasingly negative or pessimistic view of the 'costs', rather than the 'benefits', of modern civilization. In Britain, from the Romantic poets at the end of the eighteenth century onwards, a long line of writers and critics criticized the increasingly mechanistic character of modern industrial society and culture, and the dominance of a competitive and utilitarian ethos in it. 'Men', the poet Coleridge, once said, railing against industrialism, 'should be weighed, not counted'. These critics were protesting against the habits of mind, the culture, which modern capitalism and industry had brought to the fore. Raymond Williams, who charted this tradition of cultural criticism in *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958), observed that 'culture' was one of the terms used to measure critically 'the great historical changes which the changes in industry, democracy and class, in their own way, represent, and to which the changes in art are a closely related response' (Williams, 1981, p.16).

The rise of capitalism and the impact of industrial work and the factory system on workers in the nineteenth century in Britain also led Karl Marx (1818–83) to develop a not dissimilar critique of industrial 'civilization' and its cultural and social impact. Capitalism, Marx argued, expropriated from the worker the fruits of his/her labour for sale in the market. But in addition, the conditions of labour in the modern

industrial factory robbed the worker of a sense of self and of the capacity to be creative and to recognize the things produced as the fruit of creative activity. Marx called this cultural condition a process of 'estrangement', or alienation:

> What, then, constitutes the alienation of labour? First, the fact that labour is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour.* It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague. External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual — that is, operates on him as an alien, divine or diabolical activity — in the same way the worker's activity is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.
>
> As a result, therefore, man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions — eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and dressing-up etc; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.
>
> Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc, are also genuinely human functions. But in the abstraction which separates them from the sphere of all other human activity and turns them into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal.
> (Marx, 1959, pp.72–3)

Marx is assuming here that working creatively on the external world, finding pleasure in working with other people, is an essential part of what it is to be 'human'. The labour process in industrial capitalism, he argues, destroys these relationships with other people and with nature, turning them into alienating, estranged relations. This alienation also produces an alienated form of culture, in everyday ways of living, and in religion. Alien beings seem to be dominant: in the form of an angry God who seeks obedience, and in the form of the employer who represents Capital.

Other social theorists and critics of the industrialization and urbanization processes of modern, technical 'civilization' have also argued that the change from rural and agricultural to industrial social formations has had very disturbing effects upon people's moral, religious and everyday patterns of living. Durkheim, whose ideas about collective representations were discussed in Section 3 above, also believed that these changes were profoundly unsettling. He argued that they lay behind increases in rates of mental illness, drug abuse, and suicide in western societies, especially among those groups whose way of life encouraged *individual* competition, achievement and a sense of inner isolation. Like Weber, Durkheim found that Protestants were more prone to this condition than Catholics or Jews, where a sense of collective belongingness was stronger, and that this in large part explained why their suicide rate was higher (see Durkheim, 1952).

Urbanization and industrialization broke down traditional ways of living, with their ideas and moral values about right and wrong. No new, clear set of values or norms developed in the new situation. Durkheim described this situation as one of *anomie* (meaning literally 'without norms') — that is, a social condition where no clear, generally-accepted rules about how to live were shared among people. Individuals tried to invent their own ways of living, and many came unstuck in trying to do so.

We have already mentioned Nietzche and his philosophy of 'nihilism', which emerged in Germany towards the end of the nineteenth century, and whose pessimism about modern culture influenced Weber. One of Nietzche's arguments was that the values of western civilization, often represented as aspects of Truth and Beauty and Justice, were really simply 'masks' or 'fictions' used in a struggle for power — the 'will to power' — amongst the powerful, which dissolved any objective distinction between 'good' and 'evil'. This critique propagated a cynical or 'disenchanted' view of modern culture, and a cult of power and the irrational, which became increasingly influential in Western European culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The question of whether the values of technical and scientific reason could supply a moral centre to the cultural universe became a topic of widespread philosophical speculation amongst such philosophers as Husserl and Heidegger. In the social sciences, there was a parallel debate about whether science could provide the model for the construction of *positive* social laws (positivism). (Durkheim and Weber occupied leading, but contrasting, positions within this debate.)

In short, by the turn of the century, the evolution of modern culture, grounded on the domination of science and technology, scientific and technological reason, was being discussed everywhere in terms of a 'crisis'. This cultural 'crisis' occurred at the same time as, and came increasingly to be expressed in, those movements in modern culture, painting and the arts which came to be called 'modernism'.

Two of the most important critiques of modern, 'rationalized' culture deserve special mention because they pick up directly on themes

discussed earlier. The first is the critique developed by Sigmund Freud, and the second is that of the group of German social theorists and cultural critics, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, who belonged to the 'Frankfurt School'.

5.3 CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Freud's (1856–1939) work was produced in two main periods: before the 1914–18 War, when Europeans were more self-confident about their civilization, despite the wars of the nineteenth century; and after the trench warfare of the First World War. Freud's work during this second period reflected the impact of war, both because some of his patients were soldiers suffering from what were called at the time 'war neurosis', and because he wished to take account of the massive implications of the fact of a total and destructive war between 'civilized' nations such as Germany, France, and Britain. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, first published in 1930, he wrote about the hostility people feel towards this modern civilization.

ACTIVITY 4 You should now read **Reading D, 'Civilization and its Discontents'**, by Sigmund Freud. As you read, make brief notes on the aspects of modern civilization Freud thought produced neuroses.

Freud wrestles here with the dilemma of the lack of the expected gains from technological advances in modern 'civilization'. Instead of increased happiness, there is an increase in neuroses — that is, forms of mental distress milder than that found in madness (psychoses) but producing unhappy states of mind or of the body. Europeans are no longer so prone to imagine that primitive peoples are as happy as they once believed, but nevertheless technological progress does not guarantee an increase in ordinary happiness. It places demands on people, which affect their everyday lives at work and in the home. There are echoes here of Marx's notion of alienation — estrangement from others and from the *self* also.

The concept of the *unconscious,* which Freud used and systematized in his writings and in his therapeutic work with the neurotics of modern urban life, captured the importance of the irrational. The two central components of unconscious desire — sexuality and destructive aggression — became important features of the work of a group of social scientists known as *the Frankfurt School,* or *critical theorists.* It is to their work that we turn briefly in the next section.

5.4 THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

The social critics and philosophers who came to be known as the Frankfurt School also addressed some of the themes rehearsed by both Weber and Freud. Of particular relevance is the work which they

produced in the 1930s, in the context of the rise of fascism in Germany (from which they were all obliged to flee) and the fearful holocaust which followed in Europe. These events led the Frankfurt School critics to ask how the promise of the Enlightenment could possibly have led to such a 'barbarous' result. This was especially difficult to explain in Germany, which had come to pride itself on the 'civilizing process', as Norbert Elias called it — the long process of cultural refinement culminating in a high state of cultural achievement. The high standard of manners and etiquette of the French, English and German aristocracies, Elias argued, had been imitated by the new urban bourgeoisie. Gradually, the lower middle and the respectable working classes of Europe began to borrow and imitate these standards of behaviour. The new mass circulation press, and later radio, operated as the main vehicles for the expansion of this civilizing process. What, then, had gone wrong? How had this civilizing process produced the monstrosity of fascism with its doctrines of racial purity?

An Open Air Banquet in the Garden of Love: this sixteenth-century tapestry indicates how table manners slowly 'trickled down' from the aristocracy

The Frankfurt critics argued that, far from being a departure from the Enlightenment, these developments were its 'dark side' — as much part of its project as its dream of progress and emancipation. What in the Enlightenment had given rise to this apparent contradiction of all it appeared to stand for? The answer which they gave to this question was clearly related to Weber's. It was the domination of modern society and culture by what they called 'technical reason', the spread of bureaucratic

and instrumental rationality to every sphere of life, producing what they called the 'totally administered' society — the society of totalitarianism — which had crippled and distorted the 'promise of Enlightenment'. The Enlightenment could only be, as it were, saved from itself by exposing this remorseless process of 'rationalization' to a ruthless philosophical critique. Such a critique would aim to show that *technical forms of reason* had subverted and eclipsed *critical* reasoning about moral and political values. This latter concept of *critical rationality* had become lost by confusing it with scientific forms of reasoning, a process which had begun in the Enlightenment. Hope lay in recovering this form of substantive reasoning, a form inaugurated in the West by the Ancient Greek philosophers, in which moral and political values were established by public, reasoned debate, not by force.

The Frankfurt School did not accept that 'reason' should be restricted to scientific and technological ways of thinking, for these excluded rational reflection upon social, political, cultural, and moral values. It was partly the value-neutrality of so many academics, the Frankfurt School argued, which had allowed fascism and Nazism to develop. For if academics, philosophers and social scientists say nothing about values, in a falsely modest eschewing of value-judgements, then no-one should be surprised if the moral vacuum thereby created is filled by irrational political movements. The error the modern West had made had been in thinking that science and technology could provide values, or even that societies did not need fundamental values. Since the Enlightenment, both these errors had become dominant among different élite groups in western societies. The results were nihilism, fascism, disenchantment, and unhappiness. The solution lay, the Frankfurt School thought, in reconnecting with earlier ways of thinking about society and its relations with nature — both external nature, the environment, and nature in the human body. 'Reason' could and should include such *ethical* thought. Value-neutrality was a dangerous illusion, a chimera, something to be avoided, not to be treated as a guarantee of academic respectability.

6 CONCLUSION

We have travelled a considerable distance in the course of this chapter. We began by considering definitions of culture, and two emerged as being particularly important for sociology: first, culture as the meanings, values, and ways of life shared by particular nations, groups, classes or historical periods; second, culture as the practices which produce meaning—signifying practices. The latter idea has been important in the approach called 'structuralism', a method which emphasises the *interrelations* between component parts in a wider system or *structure* of relations. Languages, not just verbal language but other sets of symbols, such as those found in pre-literate cultures (totemism) or rituals (including social practices such as marriage rules, kinship rules,

and wedding feasts), can be analysed in terms of their meaning, using a structuralist method. Durkheim's work on the elementary forms of religion was discussed in the light of such an approach.

The concepts of *collective representations* and systems of *primitive classification* were highlighted as being especially important in reading Durkheim in a structuralist way. The idea of binary oppositions (from Lévi-Strauss), and of categories which do not fit into a particular classificatory scheme, producing, in turn, notions of the eerie, the spooky, or the weird, was used in relation to Durkheim's sacred–profane distinction. An example of the structuralist method of analysis was provided by Mary Douglas's work on modern ideas of pollution and *dirt*.

This type of structuralist analysis is *synchronic;* that is, it is concerned with the *workings* of a structure frozen in time. We moved on to consider *diachronic* changes, changes *of* structures across historical time, by examining Weber's claims about the role of religion (Calvinism) in the development of modern, rational capitalism. Weber's analysis of Calvinism was placed in the wider context of his analysis of other cultures, centred upon different orientations to the natural world, other people, and the human body from those found in Protestantism. Weber used two binary oppositions, in this work: 'mysticism' and 'asceticism'; and 'inner-worldly' and 'other-worldly'. Combining these produced four possible types of religious ethic. Calvinism was *the* unique example of one of these four types: an inner-worldly ascetic ethic. This cultural value system had been the absolutely necessary, though not the sufficient, condition for the development of modern rational capitalism, according to Weber's analysis.

Finally, the *costs* of the part played by culture in the formation of modern capitalism were addressed. Weber, although explicit about the benefits of some aspects of modernity (the gains in justice and equality from modern bureaucracy), was nevertheless haunted by the costs. The loss of a sense of *shared* meaning, and the sense of disenchantment in modern culture were, perhaps, the major disadvantages in Weber's view. Others, such as Marx and Freud, saw similar costs in modern capitalism. Marx spoke of a sense of *alienation* from others, from nature, and even from self. Freud developed the ideas of loss of meaning, of estrangement, in a way which focused upon the pains and discontents of modern *individuals*. (Weber had seen individualism as another product of Protestant culture.) The ideas of Marx, Weber and Freud provided a basis for the Frankfurt School's critique of modern culture, which they saw as dominated by a one-dimensional form of technical reason. They saw academic neutrality as having allowed fascism to develop — if reason is not used to provide collective purposes and to criticize existing assumptions then, in their view, unreason takes over.

This last point, about value-judgements, is an important one. When making a social scientific analysis of our own or other cultures, we must attempt to set aside our prejudices and preconceptions, to describe and

not to judge. And yet we need to remain morally vigilant. Although value-neutrality is a necessary methodological stance for sociologists, or anthropologists, initially, it is never enough on its own. Someone must continue to think about, and write about, human life — there must be someone to weigh up questions of value and the ultimate purpose of existing values, and to debate how we ought to live and how we ought to try to arrange our collective lives together. Who else will take responsibility for this if not intellectuals?

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READING A COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS

Émile Durkheim

At the root of all our judgements there are a certain number of essential ideas which dominate our intellectual life; they are what philosophers since Aristotle have called the categories of the understanding: ideas of time, space, ... number, cause, substance, personality, etc. They correspond to the most universal properties of things. They are like the solid frame which encloses all thought; this does not seem to be able to liberate itself from them without destroying itself, for it seems that we cannot think of objects that are not in time and space, which have no number, etc. Other ideas are contingent and unsteady; we can conceive of their being unknown to a man, a society or an epoch; but these others appear to be nearly inseparable from the normal working of the intellect. They are like the framework of the intelligence. Now when primitive religious beliefs are systematically analysed, the principal categories are naturally found. They are born in religion and of religion; they are a product of religious thought. ...

Up to the present there have been only two doctrines in the field. For some, the categories cannot be derived from experience: they are logically prior to it and condition it. They are represented as so many simple and irreducible data, imminent in the human mind by virtue of its inborn constitution. For this reason they are said to be *a priori*. Others, however, hold that they are constructed and made up of pieces and bits, and that the individual is the artisan of this construction.

But each solution raises grave difficulties. ...

... If reason is only a form of individual experience, it no longer exists. On the other hand, if the powers which it has are recognized but not accounted for, it seems to be set outside the confines of nature and science. In the face of these two opposed objections the mind remains uncertain. But if the social origin of the categories is admitted, a new attitude becomes possible, which we believe will enable us to escape both of the opposed difficulties.

... If ... the categories are, as we believe they are, essentially collective representations, before all else, they should show the mental states of the group; they should depend upon the way in which this is founded and organized, upon its morphology, upon its religious, moral and economic institutions, etc. ... there is all the difference ... between the individual and the social, and one can no more derive the second from the first than he can deduce society from the individual, the whole from the part, the complex from the simple. Society is a reality *sui generis;* it has its own peculiar characteristics, which are not found elsewhere and which are not met with again in the same form in all the rest of the universe. The representations which express it have a wholly different contents from

Source: Durkheim, É. (1961) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, New York, Collier Books, pp.21–9 (first published in 1912).

purely individual ones and we may rest assured in advance that the first add something to the second.

Even the manner in which the two are formed results in differentiating them. Collective representations are the result of an immense co-operation, which stretches out not only into space but into time as well; to make them, a multitude of minds have associated, united and combined their ideas and sentiments; for them, long generations have accumulated their experience and their knowledge. A special intellectual activity is therefore concentrated in them which is infinitely richer and complexer than that of the individual.

READING B HYGIENE AND POLLUTION

Mary Douglas

A distinction is made between cooked and uncooked food as carriers of pollution. Cooked food is liable to pass on pollution, while uncooked food is not. So uncooked foods may be received from or handled by members of any caste — a necessary rule from the practical point of view in a society where the division of labour is correlated with degrees of inherited purity. Fruit and nuts, as long as they are whole, are not subject to ritual defilement, but once a coconut is broken or a plantain cut, a Havik cannot accept it from a member of a lower caste. ...

... Food which can be tossed into the mouth is less liable to convey saliva pollution to the eater than food which is bitten into. A cook may not taste the food she is preparing, as by touching her fingers to her lips she would lose the condition of purity required for protecting food from pollution. While eating, a person is in the middle state of purity and if by accident he should touch the server's hand or spoon, the server becomes impure and should at least change clothes before serving more food. Since pollution is transmitted by sitting in the same row at a meal, when someone of another caste is entertained he is normally seated separately. A Havik in a condition of grave impurity should be fed outside the house, and he is expected himself to remove the leaf-plate he fed from. No one else can touch it without being defiled. The only person who is not defiled by touch and by eating from the leaf of another is the wife who thus ... expresses her personal relation to her husband. And so the rules multiply. They discriminate in ever finer and finer divisions, prescribing ritual behaviour concerning menstruation, childbirth and death. All bodily emissions, even blood or pus from a wound, are sources of impurity. Water, not paper, must be used for washing after defaecating, and this is done only with the left hand, while food may be eaten only with the right hand. To step on animal faeces causes impurity. Contact with leather causes impurity. If leather sandals are worn they should not be touched with the hands, and should be removed and the feet be washed before a temple or house is entered. ...

Source: Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp.33–6.

... The more deeply we go into this and similar rules, the more obvious it becomes that we are studying symbolic systems. Is this then really the difference between ritual pollution and our ideas of dirt: are our ideas hygienic where theirs are symbolic? Not a bit of it: I am going to argue that our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems and that the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail.

Before we start to think about ritual pollution we must go down in sackcloth and ashes and scrupulously re-examine our own ideas of dirt. Dividing them into their parts, we should distinguish any elements which we know to be the result of our recent history.

There are two notable differences between our contemporary European ideas of defilement and those, say, of primitive cultures. One is that dirt avoidance for us is a matter of hygiene or aesthetics and is not related to our religion. ... The second difference is that our idea of dirt is dominated by the knowledge of pathogenic organisms. The bacterial transmission of disease was a great nineteenth century discovery. It produced the most radical revolution in the history of medicine. So much has it transformed our lives that it is difficult to think of dirt except in the context of pathogenicity. Yet obviously our ideas of dirt are not so recent. We must be able to make the effort to think back beyond the last 100 years and to analyse the bases of dirt-avoidance, before it was transformed by bacteriology; for example, before spitting deftly into a spittoon was counted unhygienic.

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity.

We can recognise in our own notions of dirt that we are using a kind of omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems. It is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.

READING C

THE IRON CAGE

Max Weber

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment'. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.

Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. Today the spirit of religious asceticism — whether finally, who knows? — has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfilment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.'

But this brings us to the world of judgements of value and of faith, with which this purely historical discussion need not be burdened. The next task would be rather to show the significance of ascetic rationalism, which has only been touched in the foregoing sketch, for the content of practical social ethics, thus for the types of organization and the functions of social

Source: Weber, M. (1971) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Unwin University Books, pp.181–3 (first published in 1904–5).

groups from the conventicle to the State. Then its relations to humanistic rationalism, its ideals of life and cultural influence; further to the development of philosophical and scientific empiricism, to technical development and to spiritual ideals would have to be analysed. Then its historical development from the mediaeval beginnings of worldly asceticism to its dissolution into pure utilitarianism would have to be traced out through all the areas of ascetic religion. Only then could the quantitative cultural significance of ascetic Protestantism in its relation to the other plastic elements of modern culture be estimated.

Here we have only attempted to trace the fact and the direction of its influence to their motives in one, though a very important point. But it would also further be necessary to investigate how Protestant Asceticism was in turn influenced in its development and its character by the totality of social conditions, especially economic. The modern man is in general, even with the best will, unable to give religious ideas a significance for culture and national character which they deserve. But it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and of history. Each is equally possible, but each, if it does not serve as the preparation, but as the conclusion of an investigation, accomplishes equally little in the interest of historical truth.

READING D CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Sigmund Freud

How has it happened that so many people have come to take up this strange attitude of hostility to civilization? I believe that the basis of it was a deep and long-standing dissatisfaction with the then existing state of civilization and that on that basis a condemnation of it was built up, occasioned by certain specific historical events. I think I know what the last and the last but one of those occasions were. I am not learned enough to trace the chain of them far back enough in the history of the human species; but a factor of this kind hostile to civilization must already have been at work in the victory of Christendom over the heathen religions. For it was very closely related to the low estimation put upon earthly life by the Christian doctrine. The last but one of these occasions was when the progress of voyages of discovery led to contact with primitive peoples and races. In consequence of insufficient observation and a mistaken view of their manners and customs, they appeared to Europeans to be leading a simple, happy life with few wants, a life such as was unattainable by their visitors with their superior civilization. Later experience has corrected some of those judgements. In many cases the observers had wrongly attributed to the absence of complicated cultural demands what was in fact due to the bounty of nature and the ease with which the major human needs were satisfied. The last occasion is especially familiar to us. It arose

Source: Freud, S. (1963) *Civilization and its Discontents*, London, The Hogarth Press, pp.24–5 (first published in 1930).

when people came to know about the mechanism of the neuroses, which threaten to undermine the modicum of happiness enjoyed by civilized men. It was discovered that a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals, and it was inferred from this that the abolition or reduction of those demands would result in a return to possibilities of happiness.

There is also an added factor of disappointment. During the last few generations mankind has made an extraordinary advance in the natural sciences and in their technical application and has established his control over nature in a way never before imagined. The single steps of this advance are common knowledge and it is unnecessary to enumerate them. Men are proud of those achievements, and have a right to be. But they seem to have observed that this newly-won power over space and time, this subjugation of the forces of nature, which is the fulfilment of a longing that goes back thousands of years, has not increased the amount of pleasurable satisfaction which they may expect from life and has not made them feel happier. From the recognition of this fact we ought to be content to conclude that power over nature is not the *only* precondition of human happiness, just as it is not the *only* goal of cultural endeavour; we ought not to infer from it that technical progress is without value for the economics of our happiness.