

# Chapter 4

## Sociology

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Productive exchange between disciplines faces a paradox. Modern fields of enquiry are large, differentiated, and always growing. This means their boundaries are extensive, and there are many areas of potential contact between them. We are spoiled for shared topics and overlapping questions. Yet differentiation also entails a high degree of specialization at any particular point, and so traffic across disciplinary borders is less common than it ought to be. The trouble with interdisciplinary work is that you need disciplines in order to do it, and a discipline is a kind of exclusive conversation. Over time, participants come to share reference points and assumptions. The conversation gets more involved. Instead of looking outside, disciplines will reproduce for themselves (in miniature and unsatisfactorily) tools and concepts that are better developed in cognate fields (Abbott, 2000). Economists produce a working psychology, sociologists make a sketch of historical development, political philosophers know some stylized facts about social institutions. This process is guaranteed to produce straw men and errors of fact, but it is also inevitable because the ability to assume away some topics as settled or irrelevant is a precondition for any successful discipline.

These general issues are compounded for sociology. It is the most heterogeneous social science, which is perhaps another way of saying that it has been less successful at institutionalizing itself as a discipline than its close relatives. Unlike economics, it does not have a core kit of analytical tools and models codified in textbooks and widely accepted as legitimate both inside and outside the field. Economics is unique amongst the social sciences in this respect. After the Second World War, it acquired the gate-keeping features of professions like medicine or engineering, and also developed the imperial ambitions of fields like physics, all the while becoming incorporated into policy making in an unprecedented way (Fourcade, 2006). Unlike political science, on the other hand, sociology does not have a well-defined empirical core to unify it, either. Theoretical and methodological disputes are common in political science, of course, but a shared focus on the mechanisms and institutions of government has helped integrate the field. In sociology, by comparison, social life as such is too general to serve as a basis for unification.

This has not stymied efforts to rally the troops under a single banner. Auguste Comte, who coined the word, thought that sociology was the queen of the social sciences, the last to develop because the most general and all-encompassing. But these

claims have never prevailed in practice. Methodologically, the practice of sociology has always been considerably more heterogeneous (and rougher around the edges) than the claims of general theorists would imply (Stinchcombe, 1968). In a similar fashion, sociological theory is better characterized as having its roots in a few intellectual traditions which, while they have often overlapped and interbred, have never succeeded either in subsuming their competitors or expelling them from the disciplinary conversation (Collins, 1994). The most successful effort (in professional rather than intellectual terms) was the structural-functionalist programme of Talcott Parsons, which dominated mid-twentieth century sociology in the United States (Parsons and Shils 1951; Parsons 1952). Parsons hoped his theoretical approach would both consolidate the field and establish it as the most general social science. The 'orthodox consensus' (Giddens, 1979) he helped achieve was brittle and short-lived, however, and even in its heyday was subject to strong criticism.

Structural-functionalism is worth mentioning here not for its continuing interest, but because its picture of individuals motivated by a coherent framework of norms and values is what many outsiders have in mind when they think of the sociological approach. On this view, individuals, small groups, organizations and whole societies are nested systems, and each layer can be explained by pointing to the functions it performs to help maintain the overall system. Individual actions are influenced by the normative expectations attached to roles and by the values people acquire through socialization. Role expectations and core values are themselves the product of society's functional needs. They help keep the system equilibrated: roles have explicit sanctions punishing non-compliance and more general values are internalized into individual personalities. Abiding by norms is gratifying to people. Temptations to act from sheer egoism will be counteracted by the pangs of conscience and any actual anti-social actions are punished as deviant behaviour. It is this incarnation of *Homo sociologicus*, an agent governed by values acquired through socialization and acting in accordance with his position in the role structure, who goes head to head with *Homo economicus* (Hollis, 1977; 2002). In political philosophy, the classic exploration of this contrast is Brian Barry's *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy* (Barry, 1978), which both defined structural-functionalism as the 'sociological approach' and attacked its explanation of political participation and democratic stability.

The standard critique of the Parsonian approach has long been that it describes an anodyne world where people conform to normative expectations, and where both personal values and individual actions teleologically serve society's functional needs. This is a little unfair – but only a little. Parsons's theory is more flexible and nuanced than might appear, but its flexibility is descriptive, not explanatory. It is possible to talk about change and conflict in Parsonian terms, but little is gained from using his vocabulary. Parsons worked out a huge conceptual scheme, a giant filing system, rather than a model that can be applied in practice to explain things. It is worth bearing in mind, though, that the problem he set out to tackle did not go away just because his solution was inadequate. Although he deployed the terminology of cybernetic systems, functions and feedback, Parsons saw himself as developing a *voluntaristic* theory of social action (Parsons, 1968a; 1968b). He wanted to describe and explain choice within social constraints: how individual actors achieve their goals in social settings where their decisions are influenced by norms and values and also constrained by the wider

environment. He was unwilling to see these settings either as structurally determined or as wholly in the hands of rational, self-interested individuals. As Barry Barnes (1995, p. 53) remarks, 'a solution to the problem represented by Parsons' voluntarism would be of as much interest today as it was in the lifetime of Parsons himself'.

By the 1970s, the Parsonian project had been rejected within sociology, but no single alternative arose to take its place. Instead, two related trends were discernible. *Intellectually*, sociological theory in this grand style fragmented into several competing approaches (see, for instance, such surveys as Giddens and Turner, 1987). And, although important theoretical work appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, *professionally* theory began to decline as a specialization in its own right. By the turn of the century, sociological theory remained a standard part of a sociologist's education. But, at least in elite departments in the United States, it was in general not taught by researchers who identified themselves as theorists (Lamont, 2004). These changes, however, do not mean the field lacked well-defined research programmes and theory groups. The point is that the retreat of grand theorizing in the Parsonian mode – where the aim was to integrate the entire field within a single general theory of social action – has meant that the most productive theoretical developments are both better integrated with empirical research and more focused in their aims.

The failure of the Parsonian synthesis within the discipline, coupled with the rise of rational choice theory across the social sciences in general, prompted two reassessments. Critics of structural-functionalism had charged that its macro-sociology was unable to deal with conflict, and that its micro-sociology was populated by 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 66–8) blindly following norms. The former criticism led to new work on inequality and social conflict. The latter criticism, combined with the challenge from rational choice theory, prompted efforts to provide better micro-foundations for cultural and institutional explanations. One response argued that institutions and culture were carried by cognitive scripts or schemas, habit, practical action and social classification. Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 67) emphasized how social life acquires its facticity through the 'reciprocal typification of habitualized actions'. This is not a normative but instead a cognitive process, where the end result is common-sense knowledge that facilitates action. Separately, the late Pierre Bourdieu developed a theory built around the concept of *habitus*, the embodied set of rules for going on that provides people with templates for action in both familiar and new situations, and which reflects and reproduces the wider social structure in practice (Bourdieu, 1990; 1998). In a third effort to escape the Parsonian framework, Harrison White and his students reformulated role theory in network terms (White et al., 1976; Boorman and White, 1976), and White later produced a general statement of this approach (White, 1992). Bourdieu and White are important because their ideas are more closely coupled with formal methods and empirical studies than most alternatives in the field of sociological theory. The same can be said for rational choice theory, but while sociologists have made significant contributions here (Hechter, 1987; Coleman, 1990), the discipline as a whole remains much less sympathetic to it than political science or economics.

There is still a clear contrast to be drawn between *Homo sociologicus* and *Homo economicus*, then, but the comparison has changed. Sociologists remain much more sceptical than economists of explanations grounded in strong assumptions about rational

decision makers and their fully informed choices. They are more likely to dispute the idea that rewards within market outcomes reflect some combination of individual choice, native aptitude and personal investment in skills. They suspect explanations that see institutional arrangements or distributional outcomes as efficient solutions to collective action problems, particularly when those outcomes are thought to reveal the preferences of those affected by them. Sociologists emphasize that individual preferences are conditioned upon one's position in the social structure; they see people as embedded in social networks that affect individual choices and the capacity to make them; and they think of social institutions less as conventions that help things run more smoothly and more as well-entrenched practices that provide the underpinnings of people's identities and preferences.

These tendencies affect the relationship between sociology and political philosophy. They suggest three main channels for the exchange of ideas, together with some hints about the content of those ideas. The first channel is via classical social theory. Without a unifying paradigm, sociology's intellectual identity is provided in part by the continued attention paid to its foundational thinkers, most notably Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. Marx and Weber are major political thinkers in their own right, and the relationship between their political philosophies and political sociologies remains of strong interest. The main influence of Durkheim and Simmel comes through the application of other ideas of theirs to the sphere of politics, rather than by their political writings as such.

A second channel of influence is via work being done within the main theory groups now active in sociology. I do not pretend to a comprehensive survey here. Instead, I will offer some examples chosen in part because they concern empirical questions of interest to political philosophers, and also because well-developed equivalents are less likely to be found in economics or political science. One of the more direct points of contact occurred with the rise of communitarian thinking in the 1980s, as some organizational sociologists systematically developed the political implications of their empirical work on the relationship between bureaucratic organization and democracy. More recently, empirical research on comparative welfare state regimes and income inequality has become well integrated with philosophical debates about social justice and egalitarianism. Elsewhere, the connection between the fields is still manifest but perhaps also more challenging. The study of social movements, for example, reveals complex relationships between organizational strategies and the identities of participants, and makes it harder to think that a group's political identity is something just waiting to be recognized.

The third channel is via contemporary general social theory. Despite the changes in its position within the discipline over the past thirty years, it remains an active enterprise. At present, no single paradigm is dominant but there are several contenders, each associated with the work of a particular individual. Since the 1970s, Jürgen Habermas has been the most influential thinker working at the intersection of sociological theory and political philosophy (Habermas, 1984; 1989b; 1996). Habermas's writings cover a terrific range of topics and are not restricted by disciplinary boundaries, but from the point of view of sociology he and his followers inherited the challenges to sociological theory described above, and responded to them in a distinctive way. Specifically, Habermas's work represents another attempt to transcend the legacy of Parsons, but

unlike some of the other responses (which moved theory closer to empirical research), Habermas proceeds much as Parsons himself did. By means of close reading of texts, he critically reworks and synthesizes the ideas of his most important predecessors in the sociological canon. This strategy – in another echo of Parsons – led Habermas away from the more empirical concerns visible in some of his earlier work (Habermas, 1989a, originally published in 1962) to work at a quite general level of abstraction. Sympathetic critics have made the case on Habermas's behalf that his critical theory contains an empirical research programme (Dryzek, 1995), and it is fair to say that a significant stream of anglophone sociology (especially in Britain) works with his ideas. If the parallel is to Parsons, the contrast is with Bourdieu, who developed a theoretical apparatus no less abstract than Habermas's, but did so by means of a series of more empirical studies rather than direct textual criticism of past theorists.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the main strands of classical theory and some important lines of contemporary empirical work. My discussion throughout is selective, in an effort to focus on the most distinctive ways that sociological thinking articulates with the concerns of political philosophy, while avoiding redundancy with other chapters in this *Companion*. The second half of this essay is particularly concerned with the relationship between the 'basic structure' of society, as conceived by political philosophers, and the idea of social structure as sociologists understand it.

## **The Legacy of Classical Theory**

Sociology emerged as an independent discipline quite late in the nineteenth century, carrying opposing intuitions about the nature of society within itself. One line of thought was rooted in the idea that, as Roberto Unger puts it, 'society is made and imagined, that it is a human artifact rather than the expression of an underlying natural order' (Unger, 1997, p. 3). The possibility therefore exists that the social order might be transformed in radical ways, consciously reconfigured to better fit the demands of justice or the precepts of science. Marx is the pivotal thinker in this tradition. Opposing this idea was the image of society as a strange new entity in its own right. Society's influence on individuals was profound, yet poorly understood. It was unlikely to be remade at will, and it demanded a special science of its own. Émile Durkheim is the strongest proponent of this view. His work insists on the objective reality of social facts, the impossibility of understanding them in purely psychological or historical terms.

This antinomy can be seen as another, earlier version of the problem of voluntarism that later confronted Parsons. Enlightenment thinkers were faced with 'the paradoxical thesis that man was at once the creature and the creator of society' (Hawthorn, 1987, p. 27). In many cases, this tension between society and the individual was overcome by means of a theory of history: the transition to a new kind of social order was claimed to be at hand. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social thought is filled with schematic pictures of this kind where societies move along some developmental path that culminates in political or social emancipation (though not exclusively: Rousseau is a major exception). Marx's theory of history is the most influential version of this story, but he is in line with predecessors like Condorcet, Saint Simon and Comte in this respect. As Krishan Kumar suggests, while 'the eighteenth-century *philosophes*

could . . . equably contemplate a good number of stages through which mankind had passed, or would pass . . . for later nineteenth century sociologists . . . there could really only be one distinction, one movement, that between “then” and “now”’ (Kumar, 1991, p. 58). As they sought to make sense of the industrial revolution, the image of a decisive break with the past predominated: we were moving from ‘community’ to ‘association’, from ‘militant’ to ‘industrial’, or ‘mechanical’ to ‘organic’ society. Liberal analysts of modern society tended to favour a two-stage process where present-day tendencies would soon be brought to fruition. Radical critics like Marx saw a three-step movement, with industrial society as a transitional phase between the past and a much brighter future (Peel, 1971, pp. 198–200; Kumar, 1991, pp. 59–60). Of the classical thinkers whose work remains of substantive interest to sociologists, Marx is the only one for whom this emancipatory aspect of social theory is vital. For the others – Durkheim, Simmel and Weber – it is either muted, almost absent, or treated with much more ambivalence.<sup>1</sup>

### Marx

Marx’s theory of politics and its subsequent development by others is discussed in detail elsewhere in this *Companion*. Here we can say that Marx’s political sociology complements his political philosophy by giving an analysis of the conditions under which classes may become political actors, and the obstacles that stand between workers and their liberation. In class-divided societies, politics is first and foremost the struggle for control of the state and its organizational power. Classes are defined in terms of the ownership of property and it is the state that enforces property rights. As such, the dominant, property-owning classes always have a strong interest in maintaining the state’s stability and securing some measure of control over it. When surveying the sweep of history, as in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx could say that the modern state was but the ‘executive committee of the bourgeoisie’, implementing its desired policies as needed. When analysing particular political struggles, as in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, he allowed for more nuance. The question of how to specify this connection gave rise to substantial debate on the state’s ‘relative autonomy’ from class interests both in day-to-day politics and ‘in the last instance’. The best work in this tradition emphasizes how state institutions may be class biased in indirect ways. For instance, when the state is dependent on tax revenues from particular classes, its ability to act against the interests of those classes will be limited, even (or especially) if left-wing parties are in power. This kind of analysis focuses on the comparative variability in class/state relations rather than assuming the instrumental or functional subordination of the former to the latter (Offe and Ronge, 1975; Therborn, 1978).

Marx’s theories of ideology and class consciousness also emphasize the material roots of political mobilization. The ruling classes are in a much better position to act in favour of their interests because they have better resources, closer ties with one another, and well-developed ideologies that justify their actions. There is no class consciousness like ruling-class consciousness. In agrarian societies, the vast majority of people – the peasantry – do not come into contact with one another and their class identity remains latent. They are ‘like potatoes in a sack’. Marx hoped that the growth of the division of labour, the increasing concentration of economic activity in cities and the spread of the



market would create the conditions under which workers could become aware of their common class situation and mobilize for action. Marx's emphasis on the economic basis of politics is no surprise. But he also argues that economic organization is itself a key site of political struggle: 'Capital,' he says, 'is a social relation of production' (Marx, 2000, p. 281). Economic institutions and seemingly objective or neutral facts about economic life are both the result of political struggle between classes. The economist Abba Lerner once observed that any set of property rights in the market 'begins as a conflict about what somebody is doing or wants to do which affects others', and so 'an economic transaction is a solved political problem' (Lerner, 1972, p. 259). Lerner emphasized the benefits that accrue to consumers once these solutions are instituted. Marx argued, to the contrary, that capitalist property rights are exploitative arrangements masquerading as neutral frameworks for exchange. Economic institutions are the residue of political conflict. Reading Marx this way preserves the idea that classes are in conflict over the ownership of material resources, and allows relationships between class interests, economic institutions and political power to be analysed without supposing that outcomes are foreordained by Marx's theory of history. This strand of political sociology has proved more robust and fruitful for research than the economic 'laws of motion' Marx thought he had discovered for capitalism. It can be seen at work in studies of class politics on the factory floor (Burawoy, 1982), the comparative politics of the wage bargain (Swenson, 1989; Esping-Andersen, 1990) and the historical development of national politics (Moore, 1991).

### *Weber*

Like Marx, Weber is an important political theorist in his own right, and much of his political sociology can be found in his commentaries on the political events of his time (Beetham, 1974). Unlike Marx, he does not give us a master key to history or a specific programme of action, yet in outlook and temperament he is in many ways the most political of the classical sociologists. Weber had no faith that history was working towards the emancipation of the masses. He also had little time for the idea that political revolutions would solve the problems of modern societies. His *pathos*, instead, is a self-consciously bitter realism about the substance and limits of politics. Even as he despairs at the prospect, Weber tries to reconcile a series of opposing principles: historical specificity and sociological generalization, liberalism and nationalism, political engagement and scholarly neutrality, the inexorable logic of social institutions and the importance of personal responsibility or individual will (Mommsen, 1989).

Weber's chief substantive concern was the rise of bureaucratic administration in modern society. His analysis of it was both acute and ambivalent. From a technical point of view, Weber argued, the modern bureaucracy was the most efficient means of administration ever devised. When properly constituted and staffed by qualified professionals, it was the organizational embodiment of calculative, means-end rationality. Bureaucracy was also the handmaiden of disenchantment, however – the progressive leaching of subjectively meaningful values from the world. Objective efficiency and subjective emptiness went hand in hand. Weber was convinced that this was not just the typical state of modern society but its inescapable fate. 'Once fully established, bureaucracy is one of those social structures which are the hardest to destroy . . . Where

administration has been completely bureaucratized, the resulting system of domination is practically indestructible' (Weber, 1978, p. 987).

This vision animates Weber's analysis of the spirit of modern capitalism. Weber argued that there was an elective affinity between the theological concept of a secular vocation, or calling, worked out by Protestant sects in the wake of the Reformation, and the methodical work ethic best suited to rationalized capitalism. Weber saw early Protestantism as providing the moral and cultural content of early capitalism, particularly the conviction that 'the valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs [was] the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume' (Weber, 2001, p. 40). But once capitalism became a self-sustaining system, the theological origins of this ethic (rooted in the desire to signal one's salvation) fell away: 'The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so.' We are left with the 'iron cage' of rationality, where 'the technical and economic conditions of machine production' determine people's lives, and may continue to do so 'until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt' (ibid., p. 123). The future would be nothing but a 'mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance', unless either 'entirely new prophets' were to arise or 'a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals' to occur (ibid., p. 124).

Weber saw a similar choice in the sphere of politics. 'Bureaucracy inevitably accompanies mass democracy', as the state expands its administrative reach and is staffed by professional office holders (Weber, 1978, p. 983). The same thing happens to political parties, which break with 'traditional rule by notables based on personal relationships' and become 'democratic mass parties . . . bureaucratically organized under the leadership of party officials, professional party and trade union secretaries, etc' (ibid., p. 984). As with capitalism, this is not just a matter of organizational form but also the development of a new kind of personality (Gorski, 2003). Weber dismisses the 'naive idea' that state domination can be done away with 'by destroying the public documents' and filing systems of official bureaucracies. This strategy 'overlooks that the settled orientation of *man* for observing the accustomed rules and regulations will survive independently of the documents', and an appeal to this 'conditioned orientation' allows 'the disturbed mechanism to "snap into gear" again' (Weber, 1978, p. 988). And just as Weber wondered about 'entirely new prophets' arising in economic life, in politics he thought the only escape from bureaucratic domination was through the emergence of charismatic leaders whose legitimacy rests on personal loyalty. Charismatic authority is everything bureaucracy is not: a 'quality of individual personality' whose bearer is 'considered extraordinary' and thought to be 'endowed with . . . exceptional powers or qualities' that compel personal loyalty and a sense of duty amongst followers (ibid., p. 241). Charismatic leaders embody new values and inspire their followers to act on them, upsetting the routine of administrative life and injecting new values into politics. Here again we find Weber's characteristic ambivalence. Charismatic leadership offers an escape from bureaucratic domination, but in the modern era even charismatic leaders must be professional, full-time politicians. Once more, the concept of a vocation is essential to Weber's understanding of this dilemma. Like the pursuit of profit under capitalism, politics, too, is a vocation. Its true practitioners are called to balance their ultimate values with the endless 'slow boring of hard boards' that politics requires (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 128). Both the professional demands of political life and the



intensity of a true vocation for politics necessitate a split between a passive citizenry and the politically active class. For this reason, it is a mistake to think that democratic government can be the expression of popular will. Instead, 'there is only the choice between leader democracy with a "machine" and leaderless democracy, namely, the rule of professional politicians without a calling, without the inner charismatic qualities that make a leader' (ibid., p. 113). The legitimacy of modern government is poised between legal-rational and charismatic forms of authority.

For sociologists, Weber's main influence is felt through the analytical typologies he developed together with his example of their application in historical and comparative analysis, especially his understanding of the institutional preconditions of modern capitalism. His work is fundamental to the sociology of the state, formal organizations and social stratification, discussed below, as well as to subfields like economic sociology and the sociology of religion. For political philosophers, his relevance is twofold. First, he saw his own work (and social science generally) as providing a detailed and above all *realistic* picture of the conditions under which political action must take place in modern societies, and the true prospects of various political programmes. Social science should clarify the decisions that politically committed people must make as they pursue their goals. His methodology tries to balance the demands of objective science with the need to choose one's values and assess the merits (and plausibility) of one's personal projects. Weber is in this sense a theorist of political judgement, concerned with how political actors ought to make choices (Breiner, 1996). Weber's second lesson, though, is that the choice of goals is not a matter for science. Politics remains rooted in ultimate values and is inescapably conflictual – despite the rise of bureaucratic administration, political life cannot be reduced to a technocratic exercise in planning.

Again and again, Weber provides detailed, relentless analysis of the rationalizing force of modernity, rejecting utopian alternatives as he goes (he does this even as his historical discussions admit of many nuances, exceptions and qualifications). He then contrasts this bleak image with an ideal of the kind of political actor who must confront this situation: a person committed to some core value and gripped by a sense of vocational duty, who sets himself in a clear-eyed fashion against the mediocrity and everyday grind of economic, political or intellectual life, skirting despair all the while. 'Only he who in the face of all this can say "In spite of it all!" has the calling for politics', Weber says at the close of 'Politics as a Vocation' (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 128). It is a curiously romantic image from the arch-realist of political sociology.

### *Durkheim and Simmel*

Durkheim's and Simmel's explicit discussions of politics are less systematic and less interesting than those of Marx and Weber. Their most important contributions to political sociology are by way of their general social theories – most importantly, the quite different work of each on the relationship between the individual and the group. This is not to say that either was uninterested in politics. Durkheim, in particular, wrote about the political issues of his time (notably the Dreyfus affair) and had strong views on the relationship between the state and civil society, which he outlined in a series of lectures (Durkheim, 1992). His chief weakness as a political thinker, as Steven Lukes has remarked, was his conviction that the natural condition of society was one of

harmonious co-ordination, with the state as its 'brain' or central, co-ordinating organ. He thus tended 'to see politics as analogous to medicine . . . [and] to idealize societies he thought of as integrated, ignoring the tensions and conflicts within them, while seeing the realities of his own society only as pathological deviations from its future, normal, ideally integrated state' (Lukes, 1992, p. 30).

In his political writings, Durkheim develops a kind of liberalism that incorporates a strong defence of individualism, while arguing that the latter requires a stable, well-integrated society in order to prosper (Giddens, 1986; Durkheim, 1992). This formulation results from Durkheim's ideas about the division of labour and social solidarity. His intuition was that all societies rest on a moral order. In simple, undifferentiated societies this solidarity is *mechanical*, based on structural similarity and resulting in intense, concrete, shared religious beliefs and strict rules of conduct. Complex societies are different. They are 'constituted . . . by a system of different organs each one of which has a special role, and which themselves are formed by differentiated parts' (Durkheim, 1984, p. 132). Solidarity by means of similarity is impossible because of the heterogeneity of the social structure. Instead, the moral order is *organic*: the differentiation of individuals itself becomes the basis for solidarity. 'As all the other beliefs and practices assume less and less religious a character, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion. We carry on the worship of the dignity of the human person, which, like all strong acts of worship, has already acquired its superstitions' (ibid., p. 122). In practice, Durkheim did not trust this process to work unaided. In the same passage he goes on to worry that:

if [this] faith is common because it is shared among the community, it is individual in its object . . . it is not to society it binds us, but to ourselves . . . This is why theorists have been justly reproached with effecting the dissolution of society, because they have made this sentiment the exclusive basis of their moral doctrine. (Durkheim, 1984, p. 122)

Durkheim argued that the state should play an active role in co-ordinating the social division of labour (i.e., through economic planning), and that professional associations and occupational groups should act as a kind of mediator between individuals and the state, both in the economy and in politics. In other words, he advocated a kind of corporatism with the aim of devolving some of the co-ordinating power of the state onto civil society.

Durkheim sought to balance his conviction that moral individualism was an inevitable product of structural differentiation with his belief that society was an organic whole composed of complementary parts. Mark Cladis has argued that Durkheim's position amounts, in contemporary terms, to a 'communitarian defense of liberalism' (Cladis, 1992) that goes well beyond the straightforward conservatism once attributed to him. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that Durkheim's chief importance for political thought lies elsewhere. His key insight, explored most fully in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim, 1997), is that individual commitment to the social order is a moral phenomenon grounded in ritual practices whose form and content are limited by the social structure. His thinking on this topic was framed by assumptions about the evolutionary development of societies that were quite conventional for their time (a straightforward uphill climb from small tribal groups to, more or less, the

French Third Republic). But he also insisted that complex societies are no less dependent on ritual activity and sacred symbols than their predecessors, and this gave his ideas a radical edge. For Durkheim, our political and social institutions do not ultimately have a rational basis but instead are at root religious in character – a ‘moral community’ with a ‘unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things’ (ibid., p. 44).

Like Durkheim, Simmel emphasized that individual identity could not be understood without a theory of social structure, which he thought of as recurrent patterns of social relations and interactions. Durkheim, however, thought of this problem in terms of a strong dichotomy between the individual and society. He did concede that there were intermediary groups to which individuals belonged, but argued that of these the important ones (because they derived from the division of labour) were professional and occupational groups. Occupational associations, he thought, would ‘become the basis of our political representation as well as our social structure in the future’ (Durkheim, 1992, pp. 96–7). Simmel had a more sophisticated view. For him, society has real structure but it is not monolithic. The division of labour leads to a myriad of overlapping and potentially opposing groups and associations, and this ‘web of group affiliations’ is the source of individual identities (Simmel, 1964). Simmel saw that individual identities emerge out of the experience of belonging to many different social circles, and argued that the social identities of different groups can overlap in virtue of the individual members they share (Breiger, 1974). In politics, for example,

it usually happens that the political parties also represent the different viewpoints on those questions which have nothing at all to do with politics. Thus, a certain tendency in literature, art, religion, etc. is associated with one party, an opposite tendency with another. The dividing line which separates the parties is, thereby, extended throughout the entire range of human interests. (Simmel, 1964, p. 156)

While each of the classical sociologists diagnosed the phenomenon of individual detachment or separation from meaningful social life (whether as alienation, *anomie* or disenchantment), Simmel framed the question in terms of relative attachment to overlapping social circles. In this respect, he is the classical theorist most sensitive to the varying salience of group membership and hence to what would now be called questions of identity.

### **From Classical to Contemporary Sociology**

The modern concept of society emerged from its older meanings of ‘company’, ‘association’ or ‘community’ by way of contrast with the state. (The development of the idea of civil society during the Scottish Enlightenment was an important intermediate stage.) By the nineteenth century, ‘society’ had become the ‘most general term for the body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live; and . . . our most abstract term for the condition in which such institutions and relationships are formed’ (Williams, 1983, p. 291). The classical sociologists fleshed out this idea with concepts like class position, division of labour, social role, status group,

life chances, *conscience collective*, and the more general concept of social structure itself. These ideas were put to work in theories that sought to show the deep effects of society on individuals. The emphasis varies: Marx for technological change, distributional conflict and class inequality; Weber for the increasing dominance of instrumental rationality in modern social relations and the periodically decisive importance of cultural values; Durkheim and Simmel for the social-structural origins of individual subjectivity and modes of thought.

How has this classical sociological tradition been expressed in political philosophy? Two important points of contact – each already well established in the literature – should be acknowledged. The first is Jürgen Habermas's critical theory; the second is the sociological contribution to communitarian thought. Habermas develops his view through critical readings of sociological thinkers, especially Weber and Durkheim, but also Parsons. Like Weber, he worries about bureaucratic rationality and political legitimacy. Like Durkheim, he asks how social integration is possible in highly differentiated societies. For Habermas, the problem of modernity is this: 'how can disenchanted, internally differentiated and pluralized lifeworlds be socially integrated if, at the same time, the risk of dissension is growing, particularly in the spheres of communicative action that have been cut loose from the ties of sacred authorities and released from the bonds of archaic institutions?' (Habermas, 1996, p. 26). To put it glibly, while Weber sees resistance to instrumental rationality and hope for social solidarity as lying in the individual wills and charismatic qualities of gifted individuals, Habermas wants civil and legal institutions that allow for communicative rationality for everyone in political life.

The classical sociological theorists influence Habermas's thought in two key ways. They orient him to the problem of social integration (and more specifically political legitimacy) in modern societies, and they alert him to the gap between the formal self-description of institutions and their actual operation in practice. As he puts it in *Between Facts and Norms*, this is the tension between 'the sociology of law versus the philosophy of justice' (Habermas, 1996, p. 42). Habermas wants to 'take the legal system seriously by internally reconstructing its normative content' but he also knows we can 'describe it externally as a component of social reality' (*ibid.*, p. 43). Social theories of law are not sufficient to ground the institution normatively (in fact, their realism makes it harder to do so), but they cannot be ignored, either. Habermas thinks he can reconcile the two perspectives in a unified account. This is not the place to assess the success of his efforts, but we can say that the centrality of classical sociological ideas to his thinking about institutions gives Habermas's work quite a different cast from either liberal individualists in the United States or some of his more philosophical competitors in Europe.

The desire for a normative political theory that remains sociologically realistic is also at the root of sociology's contribution to communitarianism. Two of the most prominent sociological communitarians are Amitai Etzioni and Philip Selznick, and it is not an accident that both made their name in the study of formal organizations. Selznick's classic study *TVA and the Grass Roots* documented how the initial goals of the Tennessee Valley Authority were gradually displaced by those of community elites, a process of 'co-optation' that happened because of the pressure on the organization to maintain its legitimacy (Selznick, 1949). Faced with the choice between keeping its original

mission and keeping important local constituents happy, the organization chose the latter and incorporated these elites into its decision-making structure. Formal bureaucracies can thus come to take on the values of the communities they are embedded in. In a more optimistic fashion, Etzioni's *The Active Society* conceived of formal organizations as the vehicle for the expression and implementation of collective values (Etzioni, 1968; Rojas, 2006). Their organizational sociologies share a concern about the relationship between effective but cold-blooded bureaucracies and broader societal norms or community values, and this emphasis is retained in their later communitarian manifestos (Selznick, 1992; Etzioni, 1993).

In addition to these two lines of work, there is a third point of contact with the broadly individualist, liberal tradition in political philosophy. Here, sociological ideas have been somewhat slower to take hold, probably because of the native resistance of individualist ways of thinking to sociological conceptions of action. But these concerns are nevertheless increasingly evident. The starting point is the concept of social structure – the 'basic structure of society', in John Rawls's phrase. Rawls remarked that 'everyone recognizes that the institutional form of society affects its members and determines in large part the kind of persons they want to be as well as the kind of persons they are' (Rawls, 1993, p. 269). The sociological tradition lies behind this acknowledgement. Brian Barry suggests that the integration of social structure into liberal political philosophy is one of Rawls's main legacies:

If Rawls had achieved nothing else, he would be important for having taken seriously the idea that the subject of justice is what he calls 'the basic structure of society' . . . Rawls's incorporation of this notion of a social structure into his theory represents the coming of age of liberal political philosophy. For the first time, a major figure in the broadly individualist tradition has taken account of the legacy of Marx and Weber. (Barry, 1995, p. 214)

For Rawls, the basic structure is 'the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation'. His intuition is that 'this structure contains various social positions' and people's life chances are in part determined by their birth into these positions (Rawls, 1973, p. 7). The analysis of 'how fundamental rights and duties are assigned', and the effects of 'the economic opportunities and social conditions in the various sectors of society' (ibid.) has long been a central focus of sociology. If classical theory gave us the idea of the basic structure, then at a minimum contemporary sociological research can be a kind of empirical underlabourer for political philosophy, fleshing out the details of this structure. What is the class and occupational structure of advanced capitalist societies? Is there a high rate of upward mobility between generations? What is the degree of inequality within and between societies? On what dimensions is inequality most severe, and what are its consequences for people's lives? Answers to these questions can inform philosophical debates, though of course they will not resolve them. Beyond this role, though, the continued development and extension of sociological theory means that more substantial and challenging engagement is also possible, as the concept of social structure is itself refined and developed.



*Inequality and mobility*

In political philosophy – at least, in the Rawlsian tradition – there is a tight connection between inequality and mobility. The latter helps justify the former, via the idea of equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity at the individual level is, in effect, the absence of (unwarranted) barriers to mobility between positions in the social structure. Such barriers may be written into law, as when members of certain groups are prohibited from entering particular occupations or acquiring property, and so on. They may be sustained through conscious prejudice or discrimination, as when employers refuse on principle to hire certain kinds of people. Or, most interestingly, barriers and opportunities for mobility may be institutionalized in ways that are not enforced by law but are more than independent acts of explicit prejudice: by means of conventions for dealing with different categories of people, for example, or through successful efforts by groups to hoard opportunities, channel demand or close off access to resources (Weeden, 2002). It is a matter of debate in political philosophy whether the claims of distributive justice extend beyond the formal legal apparatus of the state – the ‘public system of rules which defines offices and positions’, in Rawls’s (1973, p. 55) phrase – to include institutions in the broader, more sociological sense (Pogge, 2000; Cohen, 2001; Swift, 2003). But there is a broad presumption that only technical or functional aspects of the division of labour (such as the need for certain abilities or qualifications to do a job properly) can justify barriers to mobility.

Of these twin concerns, political philosophers are perhaps more familiar with sociological research on inequality than mobility, because the former encompasses the role of the state in ameliorating (or exacerbating) poverty and social exclusion. Goodin et al. (1999) is a good example of work at the intersection of social-scientific and philosophical concerns. Two recent lines of research on inequality are worth mentioning in this context, because they broaden the terms of debate about the state and inequality. The first investigates the relationship between egalitarian goals and economic performance. In *Egalitarian Capitalism*, Lane Kenworthy challenges standard ways of framing arguments about redistribution in capitalist countries. He finds little evidence for the claim that there is a strong trade-off between equality and economic growth, or between equality and high employment (Kenworthy, 2004). The second examines a different kind of state intervention in people’s lives. The rate of growth in the number of people incarcerated in the United States since the 1970s has been astonishing, rising almost sevenfold to its present total of more than 2.1 million incarcerated in some fashion, with a further 4.7 million under some form of probation or parole. The bulk of this increase is not explained by growth in crime rates, nor is the fall in crime in the 1990s much attributable to the prison boom (Wacquant, 2006; Western, 2006). While there have always been inequalities in rates of incarceration, the recent surge in the prison population has been disproportionately concentrated amongst young, unskilled black men. The best available estimates suggest that almost 60 per cent of black high-school dropouts born between 1965 and 1969 had served time in prison by their early thirties. Moreover, amongst black men of this age in the late 1990s, a prison record was almost twice as common as military service or a bachelor’s degree (Pettit and Western, 2004). At the macro level, these trends signal the emergence of new patterns in the life course for large segments of the population. The penal system is now ‘among the key

institutional influences on American social inequality' (ibid., p. 165), with far-reaching effects on families, the labour market and the economy.

Research of this sort informs (and perhaps changes) our picture of how contemporary societies work. It is important to know whether welfare trade-offs that seem clear in principle matter very much in practice. In the same way, it is worth discovering which aspects of state intervention do the most to enhance or reduce inequality, and what their social and historical origins are. Of course, making *moral* sense of these facts is one of the reasons we need principles of equality or theories of justice in the first place. But, at the same time, political philosophers will want to employ such principles and theories to evaluate society as it is, rather than some stylized account of how they imagine it to be.

Compared to work on inequality, reference to sociological research on mobility is less common in political philosophy. Sociologists typically examine intergenerational movement (e.g., the difference between parents and their children) amongst positions in some set of social classes, or some status hierarchy of occupational positions. (In contrast, when economists study mobility, they most often focus on *intragenerational* movement of individuals within the *income* distribution.) The political importance of the link between inequality and this kind of mobility was apparent in earlier research on mobility, notably in what is often called the 'liberal theory of industrialism'. Formulated under the wing of the Parsonian synthesis, its adherents argued that industrial development meant that *achievement* rather than *ascription* would govern the movement of individuals between occupations (Treiman, 1970). Continued growth and expansion of the division of labour implied that meritocratic criteria would be at work in a larger and larger portion of the occupational structure, as no new kinds of jobs would be ascriptively assigned. In terms of politics, high and increasing rates of mobility were seen as a useful barrier to class formation. The prospect of moving up the occupational ladder (or seeing your children move up) should inhibit class-based political mobilization. The chief contemporary competitor to this view was the Marxist thesis of gradual proletarianization, whether through a straightforward increase in the number of low-skill industrial occupations or (in a later version) a systematic deskilling of nominally skilled jobs.

As it turned out, however, the detailed intergenerational mobility studies produced by this debate found neither of these theories to be supported by the data. Lipset and Zetterberg (1956) proposed that mobility rates in all industrial democracies were about the same once a certain threshold of development had been reached, and would not continue rising with further growth. This idea was later reformulated by Featherman et al. (1975). They argued that while industrialized countries would differ in the *absolute* mobility rates observed between occupational categories – because they differed in their mix of agricultural, industrial and service jobs – the *relative* rates of mobility between occupations would be the same. In other words, net of structural differences, they predicted a common degree of relative mobility or 'social fluidity' in industrialized nations with a market economy and a nuclear family structure. Further, there was no reason to believe this fluidity would change much. Evidence from a series of cross-national studies offered much better support for this conjecture than either the liberal or Marxian alternatives (Ganzeboom et al., 1991; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993; Breen, 2004). Notably, the phenomenon of common social fluidity is observed whether

occupational categories are aggregated into social classes based on kinds of employment relations or are arrayed on 'vertical' scales of occupational prestige or pay scales (Hout and Hauser, 1992). On this last point, an unexpected finding was that hierarchies of occupational prestige (that is, collective judgements about the relative status of jobs) were essentially the same across countries and over time (Treiman, 1977; Ganzeboom and Treiman, 1996). This homogeneity is one of the things that allows for cross-national mobility comparisons to be made at all. But it also raises the question of why we see such consistency in the first place, a point I shall return to below.

Wage stagnation and rising inequality in the distribution of income and wealth, especially in the United States, has brought the relationship between social mobility and inequality back to the forefront of policy debates. Research emphasizes the contingent connection between the income distribution and opportunities for social mobility, and the care required to establish links between the two empirically (Hout, 2004). For instance, in the aggregate, Chile has a high rate of mobility and a high level of income inequality, features that seem to fit with the ideal of equality of opportunity. It turns out, however, that a large proportion of the national income (about 42 per cent) is concentrated in the top decile of earners, with low levels of inequality across the rest of the distribution. As a result, while occupational mobility within the bottom 90 per cent of the distribution is high, it is inconsequential with respect to income inequality. 'Income concentration at the top leads to strong mobility barriers between the top echelon and the rest of the class structure, and a more even income distribution between nonelite classes leads to significant fluidity among them' (Torche, 2005, p. 444). By contrast, while the United States also shows higher than average social fluidity, the relationship between mobility and inequality is the reverse of Chile's. The strongest barriers to mobility are at the bottom, where the poorest segments of the population are much poorer than their counterparts in other developed countries (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004, p. 47; Torche, 2005, p. 445). Societies with similar overall rates of mobility or levels of inequality may turn out to be very different once we examine them more closely. Similarly, the nature of the connection between these two processes may vary a great deal in spite of superficial similarities at the aggregate level.

### *Individuals and the social structure*

Structural effects turned out to be fine-grained, and so scholars have moved to work at the interface of structural and individual levels of analysis. Resurgent political debate over the relative contribution of individual versus social traits to patterns of inequality gave a further push to research on mobility and opportunity (Jencks and Tach, 2006). The problem of disentangling social from individual effects is not new. It appears in Rawls's definition of the basic structure, for instance. Rawls makes a distinction between social and natural primary goods. The former, like 'rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth', are 'at the disposition of society'. The latter, 'such as health and vigor, intelligence and imagination', are 'not so directly under its control', though he notes 'their possession is influenced by the basic structure' (Rawls, 1973, p. 62). Empirical research faces the problem of capturing effects across different levels of analysis, whether these are thought of as individual versus social, micro versus

macro, or genetic versus environmental. In political philosophy, we can see an equivalent issue in the effort to draw a distinction between inequalities that flow from one's choices and those that flow from one's circumstances (Dworkin, 1981; Kymlicka, 2001, pp. 70ff.). For its proponents, a sharp distinction of this kind defines the goods that can be subject to claims of distributive justice. Critics argue that such a contrast is untenable because 'unchosen personal traits and the social circumstances into which one is born are importantly . . . constitutive of one's identity' and, conversely, 'voluntary choices are routinely influenced by unchosen features of [people's] personalities, temperaments, and the social contexts in which they find themselves' (Scheffler, 2003, p. 18). Political philosophers see the problem as leading to difficult metaphysical questions about personal identity or free will. For social scientists, the empirical implications of the distinction (*which* traits? *what* circumstances? *whose* identities?) remain in the foreground. But the fundamental theoretical issue is very similar: how should we conceive of the relationship between individuals and the social structure?

Two streams of sociological research bring out this issue in ways relevant to political philosophers. The first pushes *downwards*, to examine the influence of social structure on health and other biological attributes. The second pushes *upwards*, to examine the role of culture in the reproduction of structural inequality. In both cases, researchers began with the effort to show how structural effects matter in their own right, but soon moved towards the more difficult task of understanding the reciprocal interaction of interlocking processes at different levels of analysis.

Studies of the relationship between social structure and health take the medical concept of individual risk factors for disease or mortality and ask whether it can be extended to show that one's social location has physiological consequences. 'Social location' can be thought of in various ways. We can investigate the health effects of being resident in one country rather than another, of living in one kind of neighbourhood rather than another (Klinenberg, 2002), of being more or less embedded in a social network (Berkman and Glass, 2000), or of being in a higher or lower position on some scale of prestige (Krieger, 2005). This line of thought goes back to the beginnings of sociology and Durkheim's argument that suicide rates vary inversely with social integration. It has enjoyed a revival in recent years, with researchers emphasizing the health effects of one's relative status, autonomy or other 'social gradient' (Marmot and Wilkinson, 1999). Death rates are lower in US states where income inequality is lower, for instance (Ross et al., 2000), and the same is true cross-nationally of cities (Ross et al., 2005). Associations of this sort are also observable at the level of whole societies (Wilkinson, 2005). Cross-sectional correlations of aggregate rates leave open the possibility that individual-level processes explain these group-level differences (mistaking one for the other is the ecological fallacy). The research goal is to demonstrate the effect of inequality *as such* on people, net of the direct, individual-level effects on health of, say, higher or lower income. Many studies do incorporate individual-level measures and also try to control for temporal selection effects, such as the possibility that a pre-disposition to poor health makes it harder to get a good job. The best-known work in this area used overtime data on employees in the British civil service to show that risk of mortality from various leading causes was inversely related to position in the occupational hierarchy of the organization, net of individual risk factors (Marmot et al., 1984; Marmot, 2004).

The virtue of this sort of research is that it can estimate effects across levels of analysis. Thus, location on a social gradient or pecking order is shown to affect biological processes associated with ill-health, like the release of corticosteroids (Hellhammer et al., 1997) or the prevalence of fibrinogen in the blood (Brunner et al., 1996). As research moves from cross-sectional snapshots to long-term, multi-level studies, the complexity of measurable interactions increases. For instance, low-birth-weight babies are at risk of negative consequences throughout their lives. The predisposition to give birth to a low-weight baby is influenced by genetics and also by socio-economic status. Once born, such babies may have developmental problems, or be treated differently during childhood from their peers. Many will grow up, achieve some socio-economic position and themselves start families. Disentangling biological and social effects in such circumstances is therefore very difficult (Conley et al., 2003). Recent advances in applied statistics and the prevalence of cheap computing power make it much easier to visualize and estimate cross-level relationships like this, while innovative approaches to qualitative fieldwork can help identify the mechanisms that link socio-economic position to adverse health outcomes (Lutfeý and Freese, 2005). These methodological strategies do not solve the theoretical problem of specifying the right causal pathways, but they do aid in their identification.

Similar issues arise in the study of the indirect transmission of material privilege by cultural means. The idea that social groups have distinctive tastes or cultural practices is an old one, appearing in one way or another in the work of each of the classical sociologists. The late Pierre Bourdieu developed the most influential contemporary account of the relationship between taste and stratification (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1983; 1984). For Bourdieu, people tend to share a *habitus*, a similar set of tastes and dispositions towards action, to the degree that they have similar educational backgrounds, incomes and occupations. The content of tastes and dispositions, together with one's educational history and credentials, constitute a stock of *cultural capital*. This is not just abstract knowledge that influences the kind of art or music one consumes, but is also a tangible signal of group membership and, most importantly, a set of practical competencies that help establish connections with others. The relevant dispositions are acquired early on, through socialization and via the education system. Cultural capital is embodied in ways of acting that, Bourdieu argues, are converted into more or less beneficial results in terms of social position. Actors struggle for control over resources in social fields, but this happens through practical habits of action rather than explicit strategies. A conscious effort to deploy whatever advantages one has will tend to backfire. Writing in 1930 about eighteenth-century England, Lewis Namier remarked that while a man's status in England could be enhanced by 'birth, rank, wealth, intellect, daring or achievements', these must be 'translated into the truest expression of his sub-conscious self-valuation: uncontending ease, the unbought grace of life' (Namier, 1961, pp. 13–14). It is this kind of unselfconscious striving for position that Bourdieu tries to capture with his concept of *habitus*.<sup>ii</sup>

Bourdieu argues that our nationality, gender, cultural tastes, class position and so on are imprinted in our bodily dispositions, though they are not all equally important. He pictures interactions as struggles for legitimacy, footing or 'recognition', to which we bring our economic, social and cultural capital, expressed through our *habitus*. He wants the *habitus* to be the embodied expression of the social structure in individuals



and the mechanism by which that structure is reproduced. It is 'the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, and act in determinate ways, which guide [people] in their creative responses to the constraints and soliciations of their extant milieu' (Wacquant, 2005, p. 316). In this way, Bourdieu can say that cultural capital systematically or 'objectively' benefits particular individuals or groups over others, and that while people's dispositions are not self-consciously strategic, they are rational with respect to the field actors are struggling in, and correlated with their actual chances of success. This has sometimes led critics to argue that Bourdieu wants to have his cake and eat it, too: that while he resists thinking of individuals as engaged in much cognitive strategizing, he nevertheless wants to say they benefit from their actions in a systematic way, as if they were pursuing a strategy (Elster, 1983, pp. 69–71, 107–8).

Annette Lareau provides an extended empirical application of what Bourdieu has in mind in her book *Unequal Childhoods* (Lareau, 2003). Lareau studied white and black schoolchildren (and their families) from different class backgrounds. She argues that parents in the middle-class families saw themselves as 'developing' their children by means of 'concerted cultivation', which is carried out through managed activities, intensive parental involvement and a lot of talk. In the less well-off families, Lareau found parents working towards the 'accomplishment of natural growth'. The working-class children had 'more control over the character of their leisure activities' with 'child-initiated play, clear boundaries between adults and children, and daily interactions with kin' (Lareau, 2003, p. 3). Lareau argues that the strategies of the middle-class parents fit much better with the principles of contemporary educational and professional institutions:

In this study, there was quite a bit more talking in middle-class homes than in working-class and poor homes, leading to the development of greater verbal agility, larger vocabularies, more comfort with authority figures, and more familiarity with abstract concepts . . . The white and Black middle-class children . . . also exhibited an emergent version of the *sense of entitlement* characteristic of the middle-class. They acted as though they had a right to pursue their own individual preferences and to actively manage interactions in institutional settings . . . The middle-class children were trained in 'the rules of the game' that govern interactions with institutional representatives. (Lareau, 2003, pp. 5–6)

Any particular social field will have some type of capital defined as worth struggling over, and a set of rules regulating its acquisition and allocation. We are predisposed to evaluate the parenting strategies Lareau describes in terms of whether they are good or bad for children. But it is not that the middle-class parenting strategies are better from some neutral standpoint (in the sense of producing happier or morally better children, say), but that they are more effective given what matters in the social field that parents and children occupy. To use Bourdieu's terminology, the *habitus* reinforces power positions in some particular 'field of position-takings' – that is, the web of social relationships in some concrete setting. People 'invest in what they know and have mastered, in areas with which they are familiar and feel at ease . . . in activities for which their know-how, their skills and their habits are best suited' (Buchmann, 1989,

p. 35). As a result, they internalize the 'objective structures' they face and reproduce them through their own dispositions and choices. Their *habitus* is 'necessity internalized and converted into a disposition . . . It is a virtue made of necessity which continuously transforms necessity into virtue by instituting "choices" which correspond to the condition of which it is the product' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). However, a theory of the 'field of position-takings' does not by itself explain what Bourdieu calls the 'space of available positions' – that is, the structure of the system that gives meaning to the ongoing struggles of individuals in the first place. At the individual level, the life course is the actual sequence of statuses and roles achieved by particular people, together with their own representations of their biographies. At the macro level, it is a more-or-less institutionalized set of roles (and rules governing transitions between them), together with collective representations of what a well-ordered life ought to look like (Buchmann, 1989, pp. 15–31). Hierarchies of cultural goods or aesthetic tastes change over time, and their value is more or less institutionalized. Bourdieu's account of the role of the *habitus* in social fields is a way of connecting the two levels of analysis, but we also need a more general account of the origins and trajectory of the system as a whole.

### *Back to general social theory*

This last issue suggests a new point of connection between sociological concerns and debates in political philosophy. Research on inequality and mobility can be thought of as an effort to quantify Rawls's qualification that natural goods are 'influenced' by the basic structure. This work has made a significant contribution to our understanding of modern societies. At the same time, as Bourdieu's work illustrates, sociologists have been looking for better imagery and concepts to represent how individuals find their way within the social structure (Breiger, 1995; Abbott, 2006). The co-evolution of individuals and positions is a fundamental problem for sociology. Modern theories of social structure begin with the clear articulation of the issue. Writing in the 1950s, S. F. Nadel pointed out that although 'relationships and roles . . . "arrange" and "order" the human beings who make up the society, the collection of existing relationships must itself be an orderly one . . . [T]he orderliness of a plurality of relationships differs radically from the ordering of a plurality of individuals *through* relationships' (Nadel, 1957, pp. 11–12; see also Lockwood, 1964). The issue of how best to connect these two senses of social organization has been returned to over the years, often with a sense of dissatisfaction. More than a decade after Nadel, Harrison White argued that 'the study of persons is not effectively joined to the analysis of social structure . . . a set of positions is little more than an ideological program until filled by persons; persons in turn have social identities largely defined by their simultaneous position in several networks and structures of positions filled by other persons' (White, 1970, pp. 4–6). A generation later again, James Coleman suggested that social research was tending towards 'a loss of capacity to study a social system as a system, and a fallback to a much simpler task . . . of characterizing the trajectories of individuals within the system' (Coleman, 1991, p. 4; see Breiger, 1995 for further discussion). More recently, and in much the same way, scholars of inequality have decried the tendency to substitute 'difficult structural questions – what are the positions in the labour market and how

are they constructed?’ with ‘relatively simpler allocation questions – who gets which positions?’ (Morris and Western, 1999, p. 649).

There is an affinity between these diagnoses and recent philosophical critiques of the trajectory of liberal egalitarian thought since Rawls (Anderson, 1999; Scheffler, 2003). Elizabeth Anderson argues that debates about justice and inequality have become ‘dominated by the view that the fundamental aim of equality is to compensate people for undeserved bad luck – being born with poor native endowments, bad parents, and disagreeable personalities, suffering from accident and illness, and so forth’ (Anderson, 1999, p. 288). Adherents of this ‘luck egalitarianism’ face two tasks. First, they must figure out the rules for distinguishing luck due to one’s choices from ‘brute luck’ that one is not responsible for. Second, they must define the degree to which the latter sort of misfortune should be redressed by the state. Much of the empirical work reviewed above is relevant to these tasks. Beyond providing basic data on the distribution of goods, it challenges the widespread presumption that many individual endowments are natural, or exogenous to social forces. This also brings a deeper connection to light. Anderson’s diagnosis of what is wrong with this line of thinking is in essence the same as the critique we have just seen recur in sociology. There is a difference, she says, between justifying the allocation of goods within a given social system, and justifying the structure and reproduction of the system as such. Just as the sociological critics point out that structural questions are more important than allocative ones, Anderson argues that questions about the structure of institutionalized social relationships are the proper topic of the theory of justice: ‘free choice within a set of options does not justify the set of options itself . . . the primary subject of justice is the institutional arrangements that generate people’s opportunities over time’ (ibid., pp. 308–9).

This shift happened in economics, too, but in a much more decisive way, and much earlier. The reorientation of economic thought after the marginal revolution of the 1870s meant that:

the line which Mill had attempted to draw between the institutional and the historico-relative character of distribution, on the one hand, and the ‘natural’ character of the laws of production, on the other, became blurred . . . [Q]uestions of property-ownership or class-relations were regarded as falling outside the economist’s domain . . . and belonging instead to the province of the economic historian or the sociologist. (Dobb, 1973, p. 172)

The neoclassical toolkit allowed economists not only to give a powerful analysis of equilibrium within the market, but also to naturalize the market itself: it could be thought of less as a social achievement and more as an outgrowth of human nature. The elegance and scope of the theory pushed questions about the market’s institutional prerequisites or broader social context into the background. The central project of classical sociological theory, by contrast, was precisely to understand modern society as a whole system, with an emphasis on the interrelations of its major institutions. As we have seen, critics charge that sociology has pursued this goal with mixed success. The pervasive influence and persistent challenge of neoclassical economic analysis has been a kind of lodestone pulling sociology away from systemic and towards allocative questions. Sociology also lacks a modern, normative theory of what sorts of inequality

matter and why. Instead, scholars tend to take for granted that inequality as such is a bad thing and that it ought to be ameliorated. Systematic investigation of this idea within the field is rare. Political philosophy shares the utopian impulse of classical sociology, and of course the development of just such a theory is one of its main goals (which is a good reason for sociologists to read in it). As a field, political philosophy has absorbed much more of the influence of economic thinking than sociology. Conversely, an acquaintance with the sociological approach, particularly studies emphasizing the embeddedness of market exchange in political institutions, formal organizations and social networks, might benefit philosophers looking for a more encompassing perspective on social organization.

We might also say that the sociological perspective counters two vices of the liberal tradition in political philosophy. The first is its reliance on legalistic intuitions about rules and rule-governed institutions. Sociologists think of institutions less as explicitly agreed-upon laws or conventions and more as naturalized, chronically reproduced social practices (Douglas, 1986). The second is a tendency to make too sharp a distinction between choice and circumstance, or nature and nurture, or individual action and the reproduction of the social structure. Although sociology certainly has not resolved these issues, the field has consistently returned to them, making a problem of the link rather than assuming clean divisions where none exist. In this it is temperamentally different from both legal studies and economics.

## Conclusion

Calls for interdisciplinary exchange are heartening, and also the traditional way to end this kind of essay. But we are still left with the perverse character of academic disciplines in general, discussed at the beginning of this essay, and the difficulties of sociology in particular. One benefit of the field's heterogeneity is that you can pick and choose. A great deal of sociological research on topics like inequality, social mobility and political economy is accessible to political philosophers. The empirical results provide context and motivation for the kind of stylized examples philosophers prefer to work with, and the dominant imagery of social and individual-level effects is easily grasped.

Elsewhere, though, the willingness of sociologists to take structural and cultural concepts seriously means that the sovereign, rights-bearing, decision-making individual of liberal thought is jettisoned with what might seem to be indecent speed. Network theorists, for instance, see individual identities as emerging (often fleetingly) from a flow of interactions within a set of social relations (White, 1992). In a different area (but with similar consequences for our purposes), scholars of social movements see political identities developing out of structural opportunities for collective action, rather than being there in people's minds, awaiting activation (Clemens, 1997; Armstrong, 2002). The challenge is not just to liberal theory, either. While critical theorists and communitarians hold out the prospect of a substantively rational link between social values and bureaucracies, organizational and institutional theory in sociology has taken a different turn. Organizational practices are seen to diffuse by means of ritualized conformity with culturally validated models of rationality, rather than because of some real push towards economic efficiency, let alone some substantively moral value (Powell

and DiMaggio, 1991). These lines of research may not suit the concerns of any political philosophers, whether liberal-egalitarian, critical, libertarian or communitarian. Then again, as Harrison White notes, 'the disappearance of the person as a useful construct in this era of scientific theory of social action' is not just the fault of sociologists: 'The recent resurgence of "rational actor" models is not inconsistent with [this] view since there is little that is specifically human about rational actors' (White, 1997, pp. 61–2). Philip Mirowski elaborates this point at length, remarking that 'the quest to elevate humanity to deserve the vaunted honorific of "rationality" by painting humans as prodigious machines would seem so neurotically misplaced as to be scandalous, were it not so taken for granted' (Mirowski, 2001, p. 564).

As with the structural, so with the cultural tradition in sociology. Cultural accounts of stratification point to the creation of a 'world polity' of institutions with elaborated ideologies of citizenship, progress and social development. Educational institutions in the twentieth century, for example, expanded in the same way everywhere and at the same time, despite enormous differences between countries. Moral individualism is seen as a rationalized cultural form with associated scripts and practices that bear little relation to any measurable functional needs of societies. John Meyer and his collaborators illustrate their approach by asking what would happen if some previously unknown society was discovered on an island somewhere:

A government would soon form, looking something like a modern state with many of the usual ministries and agencies. Official recognition by other states and admission to the United Nations would ensue . . . Its people would be formally recognized as citizen with many familiar rights, while certain categories of citizens – children, the elderly, the poor – would be granted special protection . . . What would be unlikely to happen is also clear. Theological disputes about whether the newly discovered *Indios* had souls or were part of the general human moral order would be rare. There would be little by way of an imperial rush to colonize the island. Few would argue that the natives needed only modest citizenship or human rights or that they would best be educated by but a few years of vocational training. (Meyer et al., 1997, pp. 145–6)

On this view, the unexpected homogeneity of occupational status hierarchies, mentioned above, is just another small part of an elaborate and by now pervasive cultural system. The substance of political philosophy – and indeed all amateur and professional social theorizing about citizenship, rights, inequality and justice – is something to be explained in terms of the global diffusion of the scripts, rituals and institutions of modern individualism, borne by administrators and professionals. The fact that stratification experts and liberal egalitarian philosophers can find employment at all is evidence that the theories they produce 'are themselves core cultural elements of modern society . . . The obsessions of theory (e.g., with individual inequality and with the distinction between just and functional inequalities and unjust or power and ascription-ridden ones) are the main cultural themes of modern stratification' (Meyer, 2000, pp. 883–9). The recent move in the philosophical literature towards discussions of global justice, for instance, is unsurprising from a world polity perspective.

The strongest versions of the structural and cultural lines of research in sociology are at odds with the goals of much contemporary political philosophy. While this is not true of the bulk of the research and analysis that sociologists do, it is the strong



programmes that tend to set the agenda for debate and characterize the discipline to those outside it. Of the leading approaches, Pierre Bourdieu's project might be the one most likely to generate productive interdisciplinary engagement. Though developed in a tradition (and an idiom) removed from mainstream political philosophy, there are many points of contact with philosophical concerns, and the ideas are coupled with a close connection to ongoing empirical research on power and inequality. For political philosophers, of course, taking social structure and culture seriously does not mean accepting *en bloc* the various approaches presented here. Given the goals of the field and recent trends within it, though, it should be worth getting better acquainted with the main lines of contemporary sociological research. This is true not just at the more applied wing of the discipline, where there is no shortage of relevant empirical findings, but also on the theoretical end. This may already be happening. It is encouraging, for example, to see the sharpest critic of the sociological approach from the 1970s (Barry, 1978) drawing substantively, and expertly, on the sociological research of the 1990s (Barry, 2005), in the service of an argument about the complex relationship between life chances and social justice. Perhaps this is a sign that the prospects for interdisciplinary exchange are not as bad as all that, after all.

## Notes

- i Wolin's (2004) sweeping history of political thought incorporates the classical sociologists and brings out ties between sociology and political theory – such as Durkheim's debt to Rousseau, Tocqueville's influence, and the thought of John Dewey – that I cannot discuss here.
- ii Namier goes on to remark that, 'Anyone can enter English society provided he can live, think, and feel like those who have built up its culture in their freer, easier hours.' As an immigrant to England himself, Namier may well have been writing in earnest here (he certainly became the embodiment of a certain kind of Tory). Bourdieu would give this a rather more sceptical reading.

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