

HS 236

Sociological Perspectives on Modernity

Sociology and the modernist paradigm

They tell me there's not much point saying anything substantial in this lecture, because a lot of people will miss the first one and a lot of people will be here to see if it sounds interesting. So instead of launching straight into it, I'm going to talk about why the stuff we're doing on the course is relevant.

What is the course about?

Very briefly, this course is a journey through social theory of the past hundred years or so. We start (next week) with Marx and Weber and wind up with Giddens and Habermas. In between the two we travel round the theoretical world: we get to visit structuralists and post-structuralists, Western Marxism and cultural studies, feminism and post-modernism, and other interesting places. As you might guess, we don't spend very much time in any one of these; this is mainly because we're more interested in the ideas than in the names. This isn't an exercise in learning off information about great theorists; it is an exercise in thinking sociologically.

For simplicity's sake, I've said this course is about "the critical modernist paradigm" in sociology - in other words, sociological thinking about modernity and sociology as a *modern* activity - and critiques of this approach. This "critical modernism" consists of four sets of ideas:

- "holism", the idea that "society" is a unit in some sense and that it can be studied as a single entity;
- "reflexivity", the idea that we can't simply observe society from the outside because we are also involved in it;
- "rationality", the idea that we can understand society in ways which we can explain to other people;
- and "social movements", the idea that creative human action both shapes the social whole and is shaped by it.

What I want to do in this lecture, then, is to explain why these ideas matter and how we get there.

Theory and the sociological imagination

This is a course in current social theory for sociologists. Who are sociologists? One obvious answer is that we are, because we are all studying for degrees in sociology, undergrad or postgrad. That is an immediate, institutional meaning. But since the institution is (at least partly) organised around our competence in a particular mode of thinking, that mode itself becomes important to us. C. Wright Mills called this mode the "sociological imagination" and

used this to mean the ability to "understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables [its user] to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated.... The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relation between the two within society." (1970: 11 - 12).

One of the elements of this imagination, I think, is a good working relationship with theory. This doesn't mean a static possession of information about what Marx or Weber said, or even a programmatic statement that we take their theories to be "true" and see our own work as "applying" them to the examination of specific problems - which often in practice means mutilating the reality so that it fits into the theory. Instead, a good relationship with theory means the ability to think about our immediate research problems in a way which generates ideas of more general relevance - which are thus, in one way or another, theoretical; and to examine the work of other sociologists for such ideas which might be of use in our own practice. This suggests a number of ideas:

Firstly, it means that theory is the common coinage of sociology; it is what makes the work of someone doing participant observation into the social organisation of dying in hospitals relevant to the work of someone attempting to analyse the social structure of East European society in the 1970s, and vice versa.

But it also means that theory is always theory *about* something, whether that something is as specific as the reasons for gender imbalances in the Irish civil service or as general as the nature of human society in the abstract; in every case it refers, at a greater or lesser degree of abstraction, to human experience - which is, after all, all we have to go on: our own experience and other people's. At some point, in other words, theory has to be about something; and it can fairly be judged, not so much in terms of whether it is right or wrong as of whether it helps us make sense of what we are looking at or whether it systematically prevents us from getting a grip with it.

As well as this empirical pull, though, there is always a pull towards (temporarily) abstracted thought. This derives initially from the requirement of coherence, a requirement which is (in principle) not restricted to academic theory. We all recognise inconsistency in everyday statements, such as the witness's statement "I wasn't there, and if I was I was asleep". More generally, this ability to detect inconsistency (the presence of contradictory statements) and to push statements to what we often describe as their "logical" conclusions can be generalised from this everyday level to any level of abstraction. Plato demonstrates this graphically in a dialogue where Socrates helps an illiterate slave to discover Pythagoras' theorem, simply by dint of asking him questions. Thus, in one way or another, thinking about our immediate research problems brings us into the murky waters of theory. This comes about by a generalisation of particular everyday ways of thinking, and we shall see later in the course that these have been increasingly brought into question.

The nature of sociological theory

At this point we can make some slightly more general statements about the nature of sociological theory:

Explicit *theorising* about the nature of the social world is the most characteristic feature of the sociological imagination, as against both everyday forms of thought and forms of research, in whatever discipline, which take theory for granted or abstract from "the social" altogether. This of course suggests that an awful lot of what passes for sociology is so only by courtesy and not on its own merits.

Sociological *theory* consists of perspectives on the nature of the social world. These are not "laws of society", but concepts, ideas and perspectives which are transferable from one context to another (Glaser and Strauss (1967) make a relevant distinction between "substantive" concepts derived from the specific context and "formal" concepts which can mediate between contexts). Because what we are interested in is the social, the interactive, the communicable, few sociologists believe that individual social realities can only be known in their own terms and cannot somehow be brought into relation with other social contexts. This does not, of course, mean that we are looking for "one-size-fits-all" explanations. If such an explanation was possible, we would probably have noticed by now. The primary content of sociological theory, then, is statements about the nature of the social world.

By thinking about the social world in a particular way, however, we are simultaneously making assumptions about the way we can know it. If we assume that it is constituted by language, for example, we will adopt a very different methodology than if we assume that it is constituted by economic exchange. **Ontology, the question of the nature of what exists, thus leads us on to methodology, the question of how we can come to know it.**

Finally, however, sociologists do not stand outside society any more than anyone else. We thus have to eat the food that we've cooked: if we make particular assumptions about the social contexts within which other people live, especially assumptions about the kinds of knowledge and understanding that are available to them, we cannot avoid thinking about ourselves in the same way. Our own thought is just as much a social fact as anybody else's, although it may be produced in different ways. In fact, sociology's claim to have an excuse for existing largely depends on the claim that the discipline of sociology does organise the social production of knowledge in a way which differs, in minor or in major ways, from the way in which knowledge is produced in other social contexts. This would at least explain why theory is an important part of sociological knowledge.

Sociology and everyday thinking

Metaphoric blood has been spilt in the past over the extent to which sociological thinking is different from everyday thinking. One position, which (rather like patriarchal ideology in society more generally) is in retreat as a matter of explicit theory but remains operative in much sociological practice is the assumption that a "scientific" methodology can take care of the problem so that we can see our own research as purified from the unscientific nature of everyday thinking. A mirror-image of this is the argument that sociological thought is no different from any other thought; this argument also mirrors the other one in that it appears only at the level of high theory, and virtually never at the level of everyday practice (except as pure cynicism). More common is the assumption that sociological thinking is under heavy pressure from many sources, but that (at least in principle) some statements about the world can be made which are (in whatever respect) better than others. I want to offer you one possible answer, which is this:

Precisely because thought always takes place within a human and social context, the question of whether it is true in the abstract is one which is effectively meaningless: we cannot know truth in the abstract, because we do not live in the abstract. Thought, even the most vague and grand theory, is an attempt to come to grips with something. As we move up in the scale of abstractions, of course, the extent to which it is a coming to grips with ideas, and ideas about ideas, increases. But thought without an object would be void. In other words, it is the object of our research, and our relation to it, which gives sociological thinking, and by extension theory, whatever validity it has. This means two things:

Firstly, we as sociologists deliberately set out to try to understand social situations which are not our own immediate circumstances; research is always at least partly a searching-out of social contexts that we might otherwise have missed and an attempt to make sense of elements of them that we might otherwise have taken for granted. This is true to an incomparably greater extent when we practice ethnographic research in contexts that we are not previously familiar with; and it becomes even more complex when we attempt to understand "society" (whatever we mean by that) as a whole. In other words, it is our grappling with the unfamiliar, or with the familiar in unfamiliar aspects (thinking about "society", for example) that makes the difference between everyday thought and sociological imagination. This means, of course, that there are a lot of amateur sociologists out there. In this respect, the greatest contribution of methodology is not to guarantee the truth but to push us into taking systematic account of phenomena which we would generally neglect, or treat anecdotally, in everyday life.

Secondly, though, this attempt to make sense of the world is not something which we can expect to have an end, except provisionally. Provisionally we make theoretical assumptions at the start of our research; hopefully we have modified them by the end. But if my previous claim is right we need to continue researching new contexts in order to maintain the unfamiliarity which is at the root of the sociological imagination. More generally, if theory is an active relationship of investigation and understanding, it is likely to continue developing at least until the social conditions of all thought are such that the barriers we have previously identified to knowledge in everyday life no longer hold. At this point, however, everybody would be a sociologist, and theory as a specialised professional activity would have lost its justification. The complete theory (if such a thing is possible) would thus coincide with the merging of sociological practice into a society from which it no longer differentiated itself.

What is a paradigm?

At this point I can start to tell you what this course is actually about. I've already said that this course is about the "critical modernist paradigm" in sociology, and I've defined some major elements of that paradigm, but that doesn't tell us what it is. One definition of "paradigm" is the "consensus across the relevant scientific community about the theoretical and methodological rules to be followed, the instruments to be used, the problems to be investigated, and the standards by which research is judged" (Marshall (ed.) 1994: 376). By now it shouldn't have escaped your attention that there are more than one of these in sociology.

The modernist paradigm, then, is that approach to sociology which treats modernity as a central, if not the central, issue in sociology. But, as I've already said, ontology leads on to methodology. In other words, if we assume that the contemporary social world is so constituted that "modernity" can be a central defining feature, we are saying something not

just about the object of knowledge, but we are also (by extension) making a statement about the way in which it can be known. Lastly, methodology involves thinking about the relationship between the knower and the known. Since knowing is itself a social activity, it involves power just as much as any other social activity, good or bad, and is thus in one sense political.⁽¹⁾

Insofar as it represents a consensus, then, the modernist paradigm represents an agreement about the key *issues* in terms of the proper object of theory, the nature of methodology and the formulation of the political relationships involved. It does not represent a consensus about the resolution of those issues.

Critical modernism and other schools

Within the overall modernist approach, we will be focusing on the "critical modernist paradigm" and its opponents. The "critical" paradigm is in a very broad sense the approach to sociology which derives from Marx and Weber. We will be looking at how this approach developed through structuralism and Western Marxism; at the critiques of this paradigm from feminist, postmodernist and other perspectives; and at contemporary attempts at rethinking the paradigm. The other major approach within the modernist paradigm, the functionalist and positivist tradition deriving from Durkheim and Parsons, is no longer a major contender in terms of explicit social theory in the English-speaking world, although its assumptions permeate most academic research and virtually all non-academic research.

This apparent paradox - that most contemporary sociological theorists reject a school whose ideas are dominant in most empirical research - has to do with the close relationship between this school and "common sense" in the sense of the dominant modes of thought within a given society. On the one hand, this school reproduces many elements of the ideology of common-sense (for example, the assumption that there are straightforward facts out there about which we can know the truth; or the assumption that our own thinking is not distorted and determined by anything other than foreseeable ignorance or occasional emotion). Its approach to the problem of reflexivity and the question of the relationship between the knower and the known tends to involve methodologies which claim to render the issue non-problematic and thus irrelevant. What is aimed at is a position from which "society" can be treated as an external given. In other words, positivism's bracketing of the issues related to reflexivity makes its approach to modernism appear as simply an unhelpful reduction of the complexities of critical modernism.

On the other hand, the functionalist and positivist school has decisively contributed to restructuring common-sense via its appearance in applied social science: the terms and categories of state and corporation activity are heavily influenced by this approach to social reality. "Modernisation theory", the best-known functionalist contribution to sociological modernism, is a classic example of this use of sociological theory as governing ideology. The process of development is treated as a mechanical sequence of events, which is simply an instrumental means to reach economic prosperity and enter full modernity. The crude ideological use of this argument is simply that political choices and the furthering of economic interests (the imposition of IMF aid packages, for example) can be presented as technical necessities: people have to make sacrifices now for the sake of a better future. What is in practice happening, of course, is that the present sacrifices of one group of people are benefitting another group of people in the here and now, and that the better future shows no signs of arriving. The crude effect of bracketing reflexivity, in other words, is to deny that

theoretical arguments can be designed to serve, or can be used to serve, political interests. Theorising is treated as being about society, but not as happening within social contexts. A more complex effect of avoiding reflexivity - or a more complex reason for doing so - is that by denying that knowing is a social relationship between the knower and the known it becomes easier to develop theories which treat other people simply as the passive objects both of the theorist's description of them and of their practical treatment by managers, marketing executives, civil servants and politicians.

So critical modernism appears as the more interesting, the more complex and the more theoretically credible version of sociological modernism, and the course will mainly focus on it. We will of course run into functionalist and positivist approaches at various points during the course: because theorising starts from everyday thought, ways of thinking which are as close to common sense ideology as positivism have a habit of reproducing themselves and reappearing in the form of new theories. We will also be looking at arguments that critical modernism's adherence to rationality makes it unable to be genuinely reflexive: that, in effect, it is just as much an ideology of power as affirmative modernism.

The last thing I want to say about what a modernist paradigm in sociology is is that I will be using a substantive definition of sociology rather than a disciplinary one. I suggested earlier that the sociological imagination is characterised by explicit theorising about the nature of the social world: this is of course something which doesn't just happen in sociology departments. Around the corner, in departments of history, anthropology, philosophy, women's studies, cultural studies and so on, we run into people looking at the same issues. *They are really sociologists, but they don't know it!* At the same time, of course, many people in sociology departments do their level best to avoid making any of their theoretical assumptions explicit. Lastly, though, the sociological imagination is not confined to the universities. One of the most creative sources for social theory are social movements - radical-democratic movements, the workers' movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, and so on; the everyday experience embodied in and transformed in these movements continues to nourish new forms of critical theorising just as much as the common sense of domination and exploitation nourishes affirmative theory, and we will look at some major social theories related to these movements.

Course methodology

I said at the start that this course does not require you to learn vast amounts of information about individual thinkers. What it does require you to do is to think clearly about the issues involved. There is no one right way to do this; the course and the reading lists are designed so that you can think about the things that interest you and read in whatever way you find most helpful. I'll be saying more about this in the seminars, but these lectures are basically there to help you find a way into the ideas and the language. Theory often seems more terrifying than it actually is, because one of the basic strategies of any aspiring science or profession is to develop jargon and specialised references. Mediaeval clerics spoke Latin and discussed the ideas of theologians; sociologists use their own language in a particular way and discuss each other's ideas. All of this is something that can be learnt, in the same way that people interested in films come to learn the names and techniques of particular directors or people who pick up a new sport learn the rules and the jargon that goes with it.

That might be enough analogy. There are an infinite number of possible ways into this field of thought, and they are all interrelated. Read one author, and you will learn a lot about

another one, and pick up ideas and phrases that will help you make more sense of the whole field. That's why there are no set texts, and no hierarchy of readings. The central thing is the ideas themselves, and your own thinking about them.

The modernist paradigm in sociology

I've said a few things about sociological theory and a few things about the critical modernist paradigm. I mentioned the themes of critical modernism at the start - holism, reflexivity, rationality and social movements - but without really saying very much about them. What I want to try and do now is outline critical modernism as a set of ideas.

Holism / totality

The initial and ultimately central idea of sociological modernism is that of holism: of "society" as the object of knowledge, or, more precisely, the idea of society as a unit, which can be characterised as belonging to a particular type and as determined by its own internal logics. The "type" which contemporary societies are seen as belonging to, in this approach, is generally a historical one: that is to say, contemporary societies are primarily characterised historically, as "modern" and in contrast to "pre-modern" societies. The internal logics of such societies presumably lead us, if they lead anywhere at all, either to the complete fulfillment of modernism or to its transcendence: in other words, at the end of the road is either a totalised version of modernity or a new social form.

"Modernity", in other words, is a component part of the object of sociology; and it is in this sense that we are told that sociology is pre-eminently the study of modern societies, their emergence and development: sociology, in this paradigm, is pre-eminently *historical* sociology. But there are other components, which need equal stress. Society is seen as a whole: what does this mean? Not that it cannot be subdivided, or there would be little enough to say. **It means that the overriding characteristic of society is its relational nature:** one element is related to another; or, better, the elements of society are in fact these relationships. Power is an obvious example, as is exploitation, or communication. We might think of these relationships in a static way, as a system of interactions connecting an entire society at a given point in time; we are likely to describe such a system as a structure. Or we might think of these relationships in a historical sense, as a series of processes which interact with one another and link a society to itself over time. In either case, it is these interactions - the idea of society as composed, not of units, but of *relationships* - which enables us to think of society as a whole. In either case, we are likely to explain social change in terms of the internal logics of these systems, or structures, or processes.

But all of this implies a concept of "the social", whether or not this is the word used: and we shall see that "culture", "politics" and "economics" are often transferred onto the social; that is to say, they are given the same extension and range of explanatory power that we associate with the concept of "the social". This concept is itself a characteristically modern one, and a characteristically sociological one. It is also one which most discussions of sociology find difficult to explain: what I want to suggest here is that the reason for this is that "the social" is coextensive with "sociology", so that there is a bootstrap problem, or a paradigm shift, involved here. Properly understood, however, the issue is not so much to define the *nature* of the social, because that is a problem within individual theories: it is to define the scope of the theoretical blank which specific concepts of the social are to fill.

This blank, then, is clearly that of totality or the social whole: "the social" is precisely that which includes and integrates all fields of human activity, from religion to politics, from housework to literature. It will then not surprise us that we sometimes find these individual fields being generalised to explain the totality, or that we occasionally find "the social" becoming a residual category, of that which cannot be handled by the concepts of the other humanities or social sciences. It is characteristic of sociology, in other words, not to be satisfied with concepts and theories which leave blanks or fields to which they cannot be applied: an ideal sociological theory would be a theory of everything, or at least of the totality of shared human experience; and there are strong arguments to suggest that the two are identical.

Reflexivity

The first element of the paradigm, then, is a totalising approach to the social. This then implies, as I have suggested, a methodology; in the modernist paradigm this methodology is primarily a reflexive one. This means that whatever assumptions we make about the nature of other human beings' experience and knowledge needs, all other things being equal, to be applied to ourselves. Sociologists, in other words, are reflexive social actors, because we are engaged in a continuous circle of thinking about society, then thinking about our own thought as conditioned by our social being, then thinking about society once more with the social relativity of our own knowledge in mind. If we can be reflexive social actors, however, it follows that others can be, too; and sociology is itself one of the key means by which reflexivity is imported into society. This is dramatically visible in authors like Montesquieu or Marx, whose ideas enter into the political and cultural self-understanding of whole societies; but it is also a more general and slower-moving phenomenon. Already in 1959 Mills commented that the "sociological imagination" was being transported into many other fields of cultural production.

I want to remind you at this point that the substantive definition of sociology that we have adopted excludes a purely disciplinary emphasis here: to the extent that non-academics (and Marx is a classic example) have concerned themselves with the sociological problematic they become sociologists. In other words, sociology as a social activity arises precisely at the point where sociological thinking becomes a need felt by individuals, whether or not they go on to develop an academic discourse on the matter. There is then a general increase in social reflexivity; this is one of the characteristic features of modernity. You will recognise this if you think of the transition from religious or other norms as one from their apparently natural and certainly taken-for-granted status to a situation where they become external roles that we play in a more or less consciously cynical manner to one where they are questioned in philosophical terms, where their existence is explained in terms of a theory of society, and where they are replaced by a way of living that we feel we have chosen for ourselves, and which in any case needs far more ideological work to maintain on our own part than pre-modern ways of thinking. Many other ideas of reflexivity exist, and we will come to them during the course.

Sociological practice, then, is reflexive; this reflexivity is both to be traced back to modernity and becomes a constituent element of modernity. Social reflexivity, however, implies that "society itself" comes to know itself and to create itself on the basis of this knowledge. This approach leads us in two directions.

Rationality

Firstly, there is the development of what we call rationality. This is a central theme in the self-understanding of modern society, in other words in sociology. Society is variously said to be rational (in a number of different senses), to be proceeding towards rationality; or to be something which can be brought to rationality. It will be apparent that, despite the negative loading the word "rationality" has acquired and the positive loading of "reflexivity", the two concepts in fact presuppose one another: understanding, and the application of understanding. Rationality is also, however, a description of the way in which we attempt to understand society: not simply pragmatically, not in terms of everyday common sense, not religiously, not inarticulately. **The claim of sociology - and of modernity (at this point the two are not to be distinguished) - is that society can be understood in terms of reason.** This is fairly obviously a "black box" definition of rationality: it says what it does, but not what it is. In fact, the descriptions I have given you of holism and reflexivity, as well as what I am going to say about social movements, are equally "black box" accounts, although this may be less obvious. This is because of the nature of the modernist paradigm: it is a statement of what the important problem areas are, not a resolution of those problems. So these descriptions are in effect questions which modernist approaches set out to answer. We will come across a number of different ways of thinking about what rationality is during the course.

Social movements

The other implication of the statement that modern society, at least, is self-knowing and self-creating is that we need to specify what this means outside the narrow field of academic sociology. What I want to argue here is that, **just as there is an everyday sociological imagination, there is an everyday sociological practice: a practical attempt to understand and transform society as a whole.** The most important form that this takes, and a characteristic feature of modernity, is that of social movements. These are conventionally divided into "old" movements (primarily class movements, and primarily meaning the workers' movement) and "new social movements", which is normally specified to mean the women's, ecology and peace movements, although in practice most theories are developed with the ecology movement in mind. In the sociological paradigm of modernity, social movements are classically seen as the link between agency and structure. They define social formations, in that modernity, capitalism, post-industrialism or whatever can be arguably derived as a theory from the observation of its characteristic movements: for example, of citizenship, of class, of knowledge. This is not only because social movements come from particular types of social relations, but also because they create new forms of social relation. They are not only an indicator of the nature of the society that formed them; they are themselves involved in reshaping society.

These movements, as "practical sociology", have a key interaction with academic sociology; and I have already argued that many if not most of the classic social theorists have been practically or intellectually engaged with the social movements of their day. **In other words, social movements, like society itself, or any individual social actor, are both the objects of knowledge and creators of knowledge.**

These four ideas - holism, reflexivity, rationality, and social movements - represent fields of intellectual conflict within the modernist paradigm. Competing theories offer different concepts to fill these fields, different answers to these questions. Critiques of modernism, on the other hand, argue that the questions themselves are the wrong ones, and offer alternative

ways of defining the problem, and even alternative problems. It is these modernist and anti-modernist responses to these questions - answering the question, or rejecting it and proposing a new one - that we will be looking at in this course.

The ambiguity of rationality and control: governance versus emancipation

I want to make one last remark about the paradigm that I have just outlined. At the end of the twentieth century, we are accustomed to thinking of rationality in negative terms, and to identifying it with "instrumental rationality", the rationality of defining means to meet certain ends. This is the sense in which we say "rationalisation", and mean unemployment. In itself, what this critique points to is the extreme success of this particular mode of rationality: it can be applied successfully to virtually any end. (Instrumental rationality is conventionally opposed to "substantive rationality", a rationality of ends rather than means, or more exactly a way of thinking and doing things which is rational in its results, but not necessarily in its methods.)

The weakness in this simple critique of instrumental rationality is that it is in philosophical terms a purely idealist one: it assumes that a particular set of ideas, or a particular way of thinking, produces a particular social reality. What those ideas produce, however, is geared to certain ends, and the content of those ends, and their sociological origins, are often left out of sight. Thus we treat the Holocaust or Hiroshima as examples of instrumental rationality; but the goals for which these were instruments: on the one hand, the assertion of ethnic identity at the expense of all those defined as outsiders (a definition which, for all practical purposes, remains a key part of Federal German law on nationality) or the intention of defeating Japan prior to the entry of the Soviet Union into the war in the East (introducing a logic of "containing Communism" which remained operative up to and including the introduction of Cruise missiles to Europe) are often taken for granted.

This critique becomes more serious when it is combined with the argument that scientific discourses are discourses of governance: that they contribute to the definition of problems, the organisation of relations of power and thus to the control of their subjects. This critique makes the critique of instrumental reason that much more substantial by specifying the origin of the "substantively irrational" definition of aims: reason in the service of domination and exploitation.

This has been the negative contribution of sociological thinking to modernity; most visibly, perhaps, in the discourse on "modernisation" which I have already criticised. What needs to be said is this: sociology, and in particular its rationality, is certainly not "neutral technology", but rather it is structured in the service of power. In contemporary Ireland this tends to mean a close link with the institutions of the welfare state and a perspective which typically combines a radical rhetoric of outrage with a practical reformism whose double aims - to make "the system" work better and to improve the condition of those affected by "the system" - are combined. The net effect of this, of course, is to extend relations of domination and subjection: the improvements in people's conditions of existence brought about by this kind of top-down activity, are improvements in terms of the dominant relations, but not necessarily in terms of those people's own definition of their own needs.(2)

This is the major funding alternative to marketing research, whose substantive irrationality I am taking for granted. What I want to suggest, in opposition to the generalised critique of instrumental reason, is that this is precisely what happens when sociology becomes an

instrument in the hands of the state. The alternative - and it means a radical restructuring of the nature of the sociological "technology" involved, so that it becomes, in Ivan Illich's terms, a "convivial" technology - is precisely the link with social movements, in this case the use of social theory to articulate *alternative* needs and alternative possibilities for their satisfaction. The ambiguities involved in this are clear; but a sociological practice determined by an interaction with the central institutions of exploitation and domination in welfare-state capitalism faces ambiguities of quite a different order.

This sociology does not cease to be rational (or indeed reflexive), nor does it cease to be involved in power relations. Any social movement is, at least in part, an exercise in hegemony (in Gramsci's sense), and thus involves the organisation of power via intellectual and cultural domination. However, social movements are also, and to a degree unknown in capitalist firms or the state, movements towards emancipation; and there is an appropriation of sociological thought by all those involved rather than simply by the elite. This interaction with social movements, and as far as I can see only this interaction, is what keeps us from becoming managers and civil servants; it is also what keeps sociology, from degenerating into the positivism and lack of reflexivity that characterises what Raymond Williams describes as "a basic orientation to the world as available raw material", which treats nature, other people, and finally the self as the objects of domination and exploitation (1985: 261 - 2). If the primary source of positivist modernism is common sense as the ideology of relationships of domination, then the primary source of critical modernism lies - directly or indirectly - in the theory and practice of social movements which challenge this domination.

References

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(1) In much the same way knowledge can be described as an economic activity (because of its relation to value) or a cultural one (because of its relation to meaning) We should not take intellectuals' self-assessments as "political" or "not political" at face value. All intellectual activity is political in the sense described above. Sociology is also political in another sense, in that its object of study can be thought of as constituted partially or wholly by relations of power. However, relatively little sociology is "political" in the sense of being connected to action which alters the relations of power in society. Rather more of it is "political" in the sense that it serves as a weapon in the internal ideological battles of the local intelligentsia and as a means of career advancement; this is, of course, a kind of politics which tends to maintain the existing relations of power; and this may be true irrespective of whether the contents of the theory are conservative or radical.

(2) An extreme variant of this logic was the American definition, in the 1960s and 1970s, of the needs of the Vietnamese in terms of subjugation to a right-wing rather than a left-wing dictatorship - even at the cost of the lives of the people in question. A milder example of the

same logic is the administrative definition of the needs of travellers in terms of integration into the sedentary community and reforms - in health, education, housing, or social welfare, which are improvements in terms of this administrative definition of needs, but not necessarily in terms of the travellers' own definition of their own needs.

Classic statements of sociological modernism

Setting the scene

Sociology, both as a mode of thinking and as an academic discipline, came into existence as an attempt to understand the dramatic transformations that Western Europe experienced between the mid-point of the eighteenth century and the mid-point of the twentieth. I will mention some of the most obvious of these, but we have to remember that these descriptions themselves and the categories they use are themselves products of this attempt to understand them: the concepts we use to understand modernity are themselves modernist ones.

- * There is a dramatic economic shift, whose most visible effects include the transformation of agriculture into a profit-oriented and increasingly technological activity, with the marginalisation of farm labourers and tenant farmers and their flight to the growing urban centres of population; the development of large-scale industrial manufacturing processes, the corresponding decline of artisanal and home production and the rise of trade unions; and the increasingly global dimensions of trade, as more and more of the world is drawn into the global economy and the non-European world is increasingly turned into colonial possessions designed to supply cheap or free labour, basic commodities and protected markets for the imperial centre.
- * There is a dramatic shift in the terms of politics. Democratic movements make monarchic and aristocratic power increasingly untenable, and even authoritarian government increasingly requires the active participation of its citizens to sustain itself. At the same time, the state's capacity of intervention is transformed by its growing power of administration and surveillance, the development of large-scale standing armies based on mass conscription, and its increasing significance as an economic actor. This emerging power bloc is challenged by the growing workers' movement. Democratic and socialist revolutions and rebellions become a central part of European political development, but meet increasing opposition from a modernising and authoritarian right.
- * Culture is transformed: most visibly with the spread of literacy via the developing mass education systems, but also via the increasing significance of print media, individuals participate in what is increasingly a national cultural formation; at the same time, dominant languages increasingly marginalise other languages and dialects. The system of social control represented by the official churches breaks down, particularly in urban areas; where it does retain some significance, it is as a power resource either for ruling groups in search of legitimisation or as a rallying-point for marginalised groups.

In one sense, sociology can be said to come into being with the realisation that these phenomena - industrialisation and urbanisation, the rise of the democratic nation-state, and the death of God - must be interrelated; in other words, that a single explanation is needed for these transformations, and that it cannot logically be found within any of these fields as they are practised at the time - theories of political economy, normative philosophies of the state, an abstracted and often religious philosophy - but that a wider term is needed: the historical or, increasingly, the social. At the same time, the observation of the breakdown of local particularisms, and more particularly the observation of the increasingly international character of these transformations - the industrial revolution, the revolutions of 1848, the growth in communications - encourages general explanations which are not limited to developments within a single national history. Lastly, the word "revolution", applied at the

time to what we now describe as the French and American revolutions, the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and so on, indicates the dramatic effect these changes had on contemporary observers: they were felt to be wholesale transformations from a previously static era, and thus to point towards a concept of historical change, of changes from one type of society to another. Already in 1789 the "old regime" is described as feudal; increasingly, the new type of society is described as modern.

Marx and modernity

Karl Marx, and his collaborator Friedrich Engels, are among the earliest and most perceptive of those observers who did not adopt either an affirmative modernist or a straightforwardly reactionary position; in other words, who saw modernity as inevitable, yet in many senses deeply undesirable, and who therefore sought to identify how modernity could itself be transformed into an ideal *future*, rather than simply returning to an idealised past. This latter option is rejected, among other reasons, simply because modernity is seen as itself a product of the past: a past society which is therefore not stable, but inherently likely to generate modern formations.

Methodological warnings

A word of methodological caution before we start: Marx, and to a lesser extent Weber, is a classic example of the difficulties involved in saying "what so-and-so thought". Marx, like Weber, was immensely prolific; some of his most important writings remained unpublished for decades after his death (the same is true for Weber as far as translations into English go); and his immense intellectual and political status meant that many of his followers legitimated their own ideas by presenting them as supported by his authority. In other words, a "Marxist" theory or a presentation of "Weber's ideas" may be quite far removed from what the authors themselves wrote or thought - insofar as we can find that out. A good example of this is what is often presented as "Marxist political theory", a theory which derives in large part from Lenin rather than Marx, or "Marxist cultural theory", which often rests heavily on Gramsci. "Orthodox Marxism", in the sense of the theories approved by the parties of the 5th International, is something different again. More generally, we need to remain aware of the possibility that, just as mediaeval writers sought to give their ideas greater authority by ascribing them to some earlier author, contemporary writers often make substantive and independent contributions to social theory in the form of what are apparently interpretations and commentaries on earlier authors. The theories discussed in the next two lectures, structuralism and Western Marxism, were often presented by their authors as simple interpretations of "what Marx really meant"; but they are better thought of as independent theories.

This is one good reason for paying more attention to the ideas than the extent of their scriptural authority: whether an idea is good or bad, right or wrong, has nothing to do with whether it can be found in the pages of Marx or Weber or not. If we are interested in what they themselves wrote - for example, if we are interested in how their different ideas *interact*, and form a coherent perspective, we need to be aware of this difficulty, and not always take commentators at face value. In particular, most *negative* evaluations of Marx and Weber that I have come across are based on caricatures of their ideas, which are far more complex and well-founded than people who only know them at second hand tend to assume.

Marx on modernity

Marx's view on modernity is deeply shaped by his own involvement in the Europe of his day. He was an unemployed philosophy graduate who became a radical journalist and, as a consequence of this, a political refugee. He was also a political activist, involved with radical and socialist organisations in Britain and France as well as in the first socialist International. Most importantly, though, was his intense intellectual involvement with his own society. The collected works of Marx and Engels run to over 40 volumes of social philosophy, economic analysis and political comment, which taken together represent a phenomenal amount of empirical research.

In particular, Marx's idea of modernity was shaped by three developments: the French revolutions of 1789 and 1848 and the French theorists of revolution; the industrial and agricultural revolutions in Britain and the British economists who theorised them; and the collapse of the official church's intellectual credibility, as reflected in German philosophy. His empirical starting-point for thinking about the new society is largely a projection of each of these developments into the future. When he died, in 1883, most of Europe was still agricultural and artisanal; most European states were still dominated by monarchical power; and most Europeans still went to church. In other words, when we describe "the Europe of Marx' day" as being, for example, a Europe of mass industrial labour, we are falling into the worst kind of anachronism. It has been said that Marx's analysis of industrial capitalism is based on the experience of the textile industry in Manchester alone; that is perhaps an exaggeration, but it is worth bearing in mind that the high point of industrial employment in France, for example, is only reached after the Second World War. Taken in these terms, as a projection of an emergent future, we can understand his thinking more clearly.

Holism

It's a common enough observation that, for Marx, modern society is above all capitalist society. Modernity, or "the capitalist mode of production", is contrasted with an earlier society which is described as "feudal", as well as even earlier stages which we don't need to get into. What does this description, of modern society as capitalist, in fact mean?

Marx described his social theory as "the materialist conception of history". This "historical materialism" has two primary starting-points. The first is the assumption that humanity is primarily social: that its "species-being" is one based around interaction, rather than around isolated individuals. He polemicises against the "Robinson Crusoe" approach of economists such as Adam Smith who see individuals as somehow being born, brought up, and working in initial isolation from one another, until they start to exchange goods. Instead, Marx observes, human beings are always found in social contexts; their characteristic activities, what sets them apart from other species, are all social ones. The defining characteristic of humanity, however, is productive labour: in other words, the transformation of nature into material to meet human needs. This labour, for Marx, involves both mental and physical components: unlike insects, humans plan their labour. Equally importantly, this labour is a social activity, in that it is usually carried out with techniques (what Marx described as the "forces of production") and within relations of ownership (or "relations of production") which represent interaction rather than isolation, although Marx accepts that there are limiting cases, such as the smallholders after the French Revolution whose ownership of the land they worked and subsistence farming restricted their interaction to a very great extent. The best statement of this "materialist conception of history" is found in the first volume of the *German Ideology*.

In any given society, Marx argues, a particular combination of these forces and relations of production - what he describes as a mode of production - will dominate all others. Thus, in the society that he saw emerging, an industrial technology dependent on large-scale investment was driving out artisanal production; more generally, relations of production based on small-scale production for one's own use, of relations of serfdom, of an aristocratic lifestyle based on conspicuous expenditure were being replaced by a polarisation: those who had no access to the means of production and who therefore had to sell their labour-power to those who controlled the means of production via ownership of capital.

Thus social relations in capitalist society are reshaped by this emerging situation, which replaces the domination and exploitation of feudal peasants by the aristocracy with a new kind of exploitation and a new kind of domination. These, for Marx, are the primary relations within capitalist society. In capitalist as in other societies, the state, the arts, philosophy and so on are determined by this primary reality. Marx formulates this as the determination of social consciousness by social being. At one level, what this means is clear enough: consciousness is a social product, and (as Marx argued in 1845) the practical form of consciousness is its social embodiment in language. At another level, however, the determination of social consciousness by social being is translated into an unfortunate metaphor which opposes different forms of social activity - an economic "base" and an ideological "superstructure". This is confusing, because clearly economic activities involve consciousness, just as much as political and cultural activities also form economic realities.

The best way to make sense of this is by replacing it in the intellectual context of Marx's own time. Philosophies of history such as Hegel's argued that human history was a working-out of Ideas with a capital I, ideas which are largely of a philosophical or theological nature. In other words, explanations of historical development in terms, for example, of the development of the idea of God or of changing forms of government are what Marx is arguing against: a purely "top-down" history, as we would say today, which treats the self-understanding of a literary, philosophical or political elite as the "real history". As against this, Marx (I think) is arguing that we need to look at what is actually going on in the everyday lives of the majority of people, and explain changes in the way elites think about themselves in these terms. Put in this way, the "primacy of social being" is by now a more or less taken for granted assumption of virtually all serious history and sociology - we no longer think that the "age of the novel", for example, is an adequate description of eighteenth-century England. What this fairly straightforward opposition lacks is a term for the social and the cultural in a broader sense: social interaction other than the immediately economic, cultural activity other than the production of "high culture". It is in this area that the serious arguments are located: but it is an area which could not be opened up until the arguments that history could be seen purely in terms of kings, philosophers and novelists had been got out of the way.

Social movements

One of the key problems in this area relates, in fact, to the opposition that Marx identifies between those who depend on selling their labour-power - the working class - and those who own the means of production - capitalists. For Marx, because the history of the human species is the history of its social labour, the development of new modes of production is itself a human history. More than that: it is the history of a class. The development of the capitalist mode of production not only generates a new class of capitalists; it is at the same time a result of their creative activity: and the first section of the *Communist Manifesto* is a

poetic description, and very often an admiring one, of the human creativity and the immense forces unleashed by this new class. This class shapes society in its own image, at the same time as it is itself shaped by the mode of production it is developing. This is not simply economic; Marx treats the 1688 coup in Britain and the French Revolution as moves towards the state of the new society, and analyses much of the intellectual culture of his day as a further contribution to this kind of society.

In capitalist societies, the working class occupies the same place that the capitalist class occupies in feudal society: for Marx, it will eventually overthrow the capitalist class and create a new society, a socialist one in which the means of production will be socially rather than individually owned, and which will tend towards the establishment of a communist society which will be entirely free of domination and exploitation. How is this supposed to happen? Marx makes a conceptual distinction between the economic position occupied by the working class - what he describes as "class in itself" - and its political and cultural activity - what he describes as "class for itself". The argument is essentially this: The situation of exploitation and domination into which the capitalist mode of production places the working class is not the end of the story. Working-class people will become aware of this exploitation and domination; they will organise together; and they will oppose it. This awareness, organisation and opposition is initially local and spontaneous; but it becomes more and more organised, more powerful and more radical. Class-for-itself, then, involves a "class consciousness" which is ultimately directed towards the transformation of society. The conflict that this entails - class struggle - is described by Marx in a famous formulation as "the history of all previously existing societies". Social movements, then, in the form of class movements, are instrumental both in forming the major events within particular social forms and in transforming one social form into another.

So it is reasonable to say that Marx's holism is based on the argument that the history of humanity is a history of social labour: this in effect turns humanity into a self-creating subject. However, the development of this social labour leads to the formation of social subjects at the more immediate level of class movements, creating, transforming or defending a particular organisation of social labour.

Reflexivity and rationality

Humanity, however, is not simply a self-creating subject; it is also, to a greater or lesser extent, a self-knowing subject.

We have already seen that Marx describes social consciousness as determined by social being. One way of thinking about this is as follows: our thinking and communication with one another is closely linked to our practical interaction with each other. We therefore develop, at an everyday level, ways of thinking which can be shown to be structured by the forms of this interaction, in other words by the kind of social labour processes we are involved in. At a second, more abstracted level, the theories that intellectuals articulate about the nature of society are shaped by this everyday experience, whether it is their own or - as it often is - someone else's. So, for example, Marx argues that the constitutional lawyers and economic theorists, whose ideas formed so great a part of early democratic theories in Britain, France and America, are in effect working on the everyday experience of the small producers and traders who formed the basis of those movements. Their perception of individuals as originally isolated and coming together to trade is elaborated into an ideology of individual rights, including absolute rights of property, and of a state whose role is to

represent their interests and guarantee the legal context within which this production and trade can take place. There is thus a movement from the everyday experience of a class to an ideology which articulates, elaborates and formalises this and which forms the basis of a revolt against an earlier order - in this case the "feudal" order, as the French Revolution describes the *ancient regime* – and the official ideology of a new social order.

So theoretical ideas are not arbitrary – because related to practice - but they are partial - because they represent the ideas of a class, or (we might say) of a social movement. How can Marx justify his own theory in this context? The first thing to say is that he is quite explicit that it is an ideology, in this sense of an elaboration of the practical and everyday experience of a particular social group. However, Marx argues at various places that the working class is unique in history because it is a "universal" class, in the sense that the final end of its class struggle will not be another form of class domination and division of labour, but will be an end to both with the formation of a society consisting only of workers; and in the sense that its domination and exploitation in present-day society is total, leading to a freedom from illusion which no previous class has shared. **The implication is that theories based on the everyday experience of workers and the practical strategies of the workers' movement can be said to operate from the viewpoint of the future, universalist society.** In other words, when ideology is related to a group whose experience and aims can be said to be universal, it can transcend the limitations of being the theoretical expression of a partial perspective on society. **The practical conclusion that Marx draws from this is that he devotes himself to understanding the ways in which the working class is exploited, and to involvement in its struggle against this exploitation.**

So reflexivity, for Marx, is primarily a matter of this awareness that theory is ideological and of searching for a position from which these partial perspectives on society can coincide with the universal. He formulates this, in the *Communist Manifesto*, by speaking of a "portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole" going over to the side of the working class.

What about rationality? The term itself is not massively used in Marx, but the concept appears often enough, in a number of contexts. The first is in the figure of thought that "the rational is the real", in other words that a rational understanding is an understanding of reality which is valid because it starts from valid premises. In this sense Marx treats his replacement of accounts of human history in terms of the development of philosophy, art, religion, and so on by accounts in terms of the development of social production as a move towards rational understanding; and there is a suggestion that by choosing to theorise from the position of the "universal" working class he is guaranteeing a correspondence between the ideological and the rational, between socially-determined thinking and a valid understanding of reality.

A second form is in terms of what we might call "capitalist rationality": the argument that a particular mode of production involves the imposition of a particular logic - for example, a logic of the exchange of commodities - on all social interaction: everything becomes a commodity, to be bought and sold on the market. Another feature of this "capitalist rationality" is the accumulation of capital - in other words, of economic power - in ever-fewer hands. Lastly, there is a suggestion that history has a rational potential, in other words that the actual interaction of human beings in social production can be understood, brought to serve their own needs, and transformed into a situation of mutual communication and interactive self-realisation. This involves suggesting both a movement towards a form of production which does not involve domination and exploitation of one human being by

another and a movement to a form of ideological thinking which is universal and therefore represents a valid understanding of reality.

This idea of rationality, in other words, is a complex one which can refer either to modes of understanding or to an assumption that the way the world works or can work is related to the way we think or can think. This last assumption can be defended in terms of the statement that the social world is a human creation: the link between the way we act and the way we think means that the real is ultimately the rational.

Max Weber's interpretation of modernity

Marx is not a sociologist in the disciplinary sense for the simple reason that he is not an academic. Max Weber is, or rather becomes, a sociologist, because he is living and working as an academic at the point where sociology is developing as a separate discipline; and indeed he moves from the study of law, political economy and history to a stronger identity as a sociologist. This has important consequences: whereas Marx, the activist thinker, is working towards a global theory which renders the older disciplinary division of labour obsolete by showing the interrelation between the different spheres of human life, Weber sets out to define sociology as *different* from the other humanities, and restricts its scope - in theory, at least - more perhaps than any comparable sociological theorist, to the point where, if we are to hold ourselves to his explicit statements, it would be impossible to describe him as a holist.

There are a number of steps in this narrowing of the jurisdiction of sociology. Firstly, Weber takes what is known as a "methodologically individualist" position: in other words, he assumes that all statements about the human world can in principle be reduced to statements about individuals and aggregates of individuals. This means treating individuals, rather than relationships between individuals, as primary. A consequence of this is that these relationships depend on active construction, that they do not necessarily apply globally, and that even where they do apply they can best be described in terms of the probability that the relationship or process in question will apply in a particular case. Secondly, he restricts the scope of sociology as a discipline to the study of meaningful social action: in other words, to the action of these individuals insofar as their action is oriented towards each other and insofar as they attach meaning to it. This involves an exclusion of biology, of the unconscious, potentially of some economic relationships, and so on. This position is stated in detail in the opening section of *Basic concepts in sociology*.

So Weber is not a straightforward holist: he undermines both the possibility of general explanations and the scope of sociology and the social itself to a very great extent. However, this theoretical refusal of holism is undermined by a number of features of his thinking.

Rationality and modernity

The first and most obvious of these is this: there is a tension between the statement that we start from individuals rather than relationships and the statement that what we are interested in is the way those individuals orient their action to each other, in other words, their interaction. The effect of this becomes clear when we consider the second element of Weber's definition of sociology: that it is not just about social action, but about *meaningful* social action. He proceeds to develop a categorisation of the *types* of meaning which can be attached to social action: a categorisation which appears in some senses as a general statement of the kinds of ways in which people can relate to one another, or in other words

precisely the kind of general statement about social relationships that methodological individualism finds suspect. These types of social action reappear in a number of forms, for example as the different ways in which a given power structure can find legitimisation (Weber 1984: 44, 62). *Traditional* meanings of action are related simply to habit and custom, and are described by Weber as coming close to having no meaning, because unreflective. *Affective* action relates to the emotions, and is equally seen as often meaningless in these terms. The major distinction of clearly meaningful action, then is between the last two categories: the value-rational and the goal-rational. *Value-rational* action treats action as having a value in itself, which is independent from its effect, and derives, for example, from moral, aesthetic or religious criteria. *Goal-rational*, or instrumental, action, is oriented purely towards desired results.

This last category is particularly associated with Weber's account of modernity, which he sees as a progressive extension of this principle of instrumental rationality, which sees action as deriving its sole meaning and interest from its results, to dominate all contemporary society. For Weber, the history of modernity is the history of the progressive orientation of all social action, in all contexts, to instrumental rationality. This rationalisation of social life involves an ever-greater development of technical means and a progressive relegation of the ends towards which these means are supposed to lead. An example may make this clearer. Weber argues, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, that Calvinist and Dissenting religion represented a rationalisation of human behaviour, which focussed people's constant attention on the relationship between their everyday activity and their hope of salvation. All behaviour was scrutinised to see whether or not it represented a waste of time, and thus possibly an indication that one was not destined for salvation. This obsession with making the most of each minute, with the rationalisation of everyday life, particularly economic life, gradually came to take complete precedence over the intended goal, of demonstrating to oneself that one was likely to be destined for salvation. Weber's analysis of the development of bureaucracy is similar. Bureaucracy, for Weber, is simply the most technically efficient means of organising the action of a state. Thus, bureaucratic means of organisation come to predominate in modern societies irrespective of the actual goals which they are supposed to serve. This means that increasingly bureaucracy takes on a life and a logic of its own, which renders its ultimate goals irrelevant.

In Weber's terminology, formal rationality, the (instrumental) rationality of a particular form, leads to substantive irrationality, a content which is in fact derived from the form and not from the goal which the formal rationality is supposed to serve. Capitalism is itself a very important instance of this general rationalisation of behaviour which characterises modern society: Weber defines it in terms of the rationalisation of the pursuit of profit, a rationalisation which ultimately means that the individuals to whom this profit is accruing are not in a position to enjoy its possession, but must rationalise their own lives, replacing an aristocratic lifestyle based on waste and conspicuous consumption with a bourgeois lifestyle based effectively on the service of profit rather than its enjoyment. Once again the means becomes the end. Weber's account of modernity as the progressive extension of rationalisation, and his scepticism about the possibility of reversing this trend, make his view of modernity, at least, effectively a holistic one.

Social movements

Weber's view of social movements, however, is less holistic; and here he serves as a prototype for that approach which sees structures - of rationality, for example - as ultimately

more deeply-founded than collective action; even though both are of course in his own terminology simply forms of meaningful social action. This can be illustrated in relation to his approach to social class.

It is traditional to represent Weber's views on class as representing a rejection of Marx's; there is some truth in this, but it is only partial. For example, Weber agrees with Marx that the worker's movement is an extremely significant and powerful movement, and even sees a successful installation of a socialist regime as a possibility. However, he argues, like Robert Michels, that it will be forced to adopt bureaucratic means in order to reach this goal - and hence that the socialist regime would represent an intensification of instrumental rationalisation at the expense of any possibility of achieving the substantive rationalities that were aimed at. Equally, Weber accepts not only that economic class is a fundamental basis for social action - in a formula reminiscent of Marx's distinction between class in itself and class for itself - and even that status differences are increasingly eroded by economic class in modern society.

There are, I think, two primary differences between Weber and Marx on class. The first is in their conception of the economic class structure that underlies class movements. For Marx, we have seen, this can ultimately be reduced to a primary opposition between the exploited and the exploiters, those who labour and those who live off their labour. For Weber, however, economic situation is not so much a relationship as a given, which individuals bring to a market. Schematically, we can say that individuals bring their labour-power, or their skills, or their ownership of the means of production to a market; and it is this market situation, for Weber, that generates the "life-chances" of each individual. In other words, Weber's economic classes are more heterogeneous and less interactive than Marx's; this conception, at least, cannot be said to be holistic.

The other major difference which Weber brings to his analysis of social movements is the concept of social closure. This he treats as a process whereby groups aim at restricting access to particularly desirable things - occupations, goods, status or whatever - to themselves. Much of his writing deals with the extent to which successful collective action results in this kind of social closure for the sake of exercising a monopoly on something; in recent years neo-Weberians such as Frank Parkin have argued that access to political power is itself such a good, and that a major aim of collective action is to move from an "outsider" status of exclusion to an "insider" status where the group enjoys a monopoly of influence on political power on the issues that are important to it.

Reflexivity

So Weber's theory, in particular his analysis of modernity as rationalisation, starts from an individualist point of view but tends towards a holistic one, which is, as I argued in the previous week, to a certain extent inherent in the idea of "the social". His concept of social movements emphasises their partial character, but he is always concerned to emphasise that collective action is also a feature of dominant groups, not just of subordinate ones; and he offers us a picture of dominant groups controlling the state and monopolising access to desirable goods thanks to the success of their organisation which can be said to offer the potential of a general account of the dominant social order, if not of the totality of the social order (because there are also outsider and subordinate groups challenging this order). What about reflexivity?

Weber, like Marx, is well aware that the sociologist is also a social actor. Basing himself, like Marx, on the principle emphasised by Vico that the real is the created, that the social world is a human creation, he argues that our own status as social actors makes it possible for us to understand the action of others, and in particular the meaning they attach to it. This is the starting-point of what is generally described, in English, as Weber's concept of *Verstehen*, in other words of understanding, or as we say of interpretation: we interpret the action of others, based on our shared human situation and participation in the creation of the social world. Remembering in particular that one of Weber's caveats about traditional and emotional reasons for action is that they are highly unreflective - that they are not thought about - it is reasonable to say that it is reflexivity, for Weber, that guarantees the possibility of interpretation; and this is another reason why Weber treats traditional and emotional action as falling on the borders of the social.

A major element in the method of *Verstehen* is what Weber describes as "ideal types". These are models which describe "rules of the way things happen" in a way that makes sense to us. Thus we might construct an ideal-typical description of the way in which religions founded by a charismatic prophet become, over time, highly structured organisations. The relationship of this model to the way things actually happen is then variable: in general, Weber says, it helps to develop these models at as abstracted a level as possible, so that the concepts become as unambiguous as possible and their interrelation is as clear as possible. These ideal types are then yardsticks against which we can measure what actually happened.

In other words, the ideal type is a description of a particular logic of process, or of a rational sequence of events in the sense of one where their sequence has a meaning. Clearly they will be far easier to establish in the case of value-rational or goal-rational sequences, since an assumption of continued custom tells us very little about the content of the custom, and assumptions that emotions follow particular sequences are very risky. In other words, it is rationality itself - whether goal-rationality or value-rationality, that makes interpretation possible, on the basis of a shared and reflexive participation in the social world. Beyond the specific case of rationalisation as a general process in modernity, then, rationality for Weber is a concept which bridges the gap between sociology and its objects: rationality, in either form, is present as a tendency within society, which may be approximated to a greater or lesser extent. The sociologist can use this tendential rationality to make more sense of the actual process of events.

Clearly, then, the more rationalised society becomes - the deeper into modernity we go - the easier the sociologist's task should become and the closer their interpretations should correspond with what actually happens. As we shall see in subsequent lectures, this expectation has only been partially realised, if at all.

Ultra-modernism: the structuralist case

Introduction

Structuralism, like positivism, is no longer of immediate interest in its own right, and I will not be attempting to provide anything like a comprehensive account of it. Where it is of interest is in a historical perspective, in that it represents one of the most thorough-going versions of modernist thinking in sociology, and a series of ideas which remain current in, for example, much neo-Marxist as well as much "post-structuralist" thought.

Thus structuralism imposes itself on us as a stage in social theory whose effects are still widely felt; its period of dominance is now long-since past, but what remains is very often a social theory which has developed from structuralist approaches, which has defined itself against them, and which bears the marks of this encounter.

Structuralism's claim to be considered as a form of *critical* modernism, however, is rather more tenuous. While much structuralism claims to be "Marxist", very often it appears rather more as an incorporation of Marxism into a rather more affirmative form of modernism; and this is particularly evident in the difficulties structuralist thought faces in coming to terms with reflexivity, as well as its consequent explicit or implicit flirtation with positivism.

I'll mostly be talking about Levi-Strauss and Althusser, who are the best-known strictly structuralist theorists and can certainly be said to be critical in terms of their political positions and the implications of some of their work, if not always in terms of reflexivity. This structuralism intersects, however, with the positivist and functionalist school deriving from Comte and Durkheim, which leads into Parsons' "structural-functionalism"; and we shall see that there are good reasons for this convergence.

I won't be attempting to give a remotely comprehensive account of either Levi-Strauss or Althusser, who are in any case opposed on a very wide variety of issues; I'm interested here only with those elements of their arguments which bear on our themes in this course. Incidentally, some of the best accounts of structuralism are critiques rather than sympathetic expositions. Beyond the material on the reading list, you might be interested in the important critique of Althusser by EP Thompson in *The poverty of theory*, which I'll be discussing later in the course.

Holism

Relationalism and the death of the subject

I've made a distinction in previous weeks between "methodological individualist" approaches which take the individual as the starting-point for social theory and "relational" approaches which focus on the relations between individuals. We've seen that in Marx the relational emphasis derives from a conception of the individual as essentially social in nature and that in Weber what is relevant to the sociologist is action which is oriented towards the behaviour of others. In both cases, structure arises out of social interaction, geared particularly towards labour in Marx and towards meaning in Weber. In structuralism, relationship takes off and becomes fully independent: it is no longer human beings who relate with each other, but the fact of relationship which first creates the social and cultural individual out of an amorphous biological mass. This is sometimes turned into a statement that we can only know the social,

in other words the relational, and that "the individual" or "human nature" are therefore metaphysical concepts in the strict sense that we cannot know them. We cannot know Mary Murphy in her unique, individual internal experience (even if we believe it exists), because all we have available to us is our social interaction with her: what she says and what she does. This ultra-relationalism, in other words, leads to what is known by the slogan of "the death of the subject": either the individual literally does not exist because they are only created by social interaction, and form simply an intersection between different social relations; or the individual is methodologically unknowable because we can only know the social.

The argument that the individual literally does not exist, that they are only the intersection of social relations or the "bearers" of social structure, is argued very strongly by Althusser, who sees our belief that we are individuals to be a psychological illusion. Instead, he argues, "the category of the subject ... is the constitutive category of all ideology". Our (illusory) subjectivity generates ideology, and ideology reproduces our illusions of subjectivity.

Difference

All that we can know, then, or all that exists, is the relational. If all that we can know about is relations, then we can think about the way in which those relations interact with one another in a very detached, and often very formalistic approach. We can also try and categorise the different types of relation which are possible; Weber's four types of meaningful action are a move in this direction, and we've seen that despite his methodological individualism the concept of instrumental rationality in particular has a tendency to become dominant in his thinking.

What relationalism is likely to lead us to, in other words, is a categorisation of different types of relation and different levels of relation, and an account of society in terms of the interrelation of these different relations. This can clearly become very abstracted very rapidly (and Mills' discussion of the problems of "Grand Theory" is very relevant here). So relational approaches tend towards this kind of categorisation, but they also tend to privilege intellectual consistency over empirical usefulness. In other words, because our description of different types of social relation is likely to be quite an abstracted one if it is to be much use in telling us things we don't already know, it will be a highly intellectual account.

As we generate more of these concepts describing types and levels of relations, we are going to want to make them as consistent as possible with each other, for very valid intellectual reasons. For equally valid reasons, we are likely to want to be able to generate all of them from as restricted a number of basic concepts as possible, in other words, to generate typologies of possible variations and interrelations of particular types of relations. The net effect of all of this is that relational approaches have a tendency towards what we can properly describe as structuralist accounts, that is accounts which derive all of social reality from the operation and permutation of a limited number of basic concepts; ideally this number can be reduced to one.

Because this core concept, from which our description of society is generated, is a highly intellectual one, this is very likely to produce a form of philosophical idealism: a theory which treats the (social) world as generated from ideas, and in this case from a single idea. While there are dramatic differences in the content, the *structure* of our account of society is likely to be very similar whatever idea we start from; in some ways Althusser's account, not

of actual modes of production but of the *idea* of modes of production, and Levi-Strauss' account of culture oriented around difference, produce quite similar ways of thinking.

To finish with this general account, it has to be said that Levi-Strauss' account privileges this approach rather more visibly, and it is worth saying something briefly about what it is. Essentially Levi-Strauss performs two operations in his account of human culture: on the one hand he employs a linguistic analogy to treat culture, not just as a system of relations, but as a system of symbolic relations, such as myths; on the other hand, using the same analogy, he aims at a purely formal description of the various elements involved in particular myths: in other words, he sets out to describe structure but not content.

What this leads to is an argument that there is an objective meaning in human culture (revealed by structure) which is other than the subjective meaning (revealed by content). Since, however, this objective meaning cannot be straightforwardly shown to be present in a particular myth once we bracket any question of the way people say they understand it or the contexts they tell it in, it has to be located within the unconscious. In other words, from a description of social relations we move to a description of the nature of the human psyche. To complete this account, what Levi-Strauss claims to be the central feature of the human unconscious - a claim which he believes to be backed up by linguistics - is naturally enough identical with the concept he uses to analyse the objective meaning of the form of myths; this concept is that of difference or distinction. For Levi-Strauss, then, the end of the intellectual journey is a description of the social and in particular cultural world as a reflection of the supposed tendency of the human brain to divide things up.

Functionalism

There is a problem with this approach, and it is not just a difficulty with Levi-Strauss. If we assume that the social world can be derived from an idea - the idea of the capitalist mode of production, the idea of difference - then in principle there is no possible explanation of how social change arises. The world is divided up like this because it is identical with the way the idea is organised; there is no reason why it should change. Now of course one can develop *ad hoc* explanations of any changes in this structure, and in practice this is very often done. Another possibility is to develop a typology of different possible types of society, so that change is simply change from one way of expressing the idea to another one. A more interesting and widely-used approach, however, is what is known as functional explanations.

Functional explanations are explanations of events in terms, not of their causes, but of their effects. For example, we might explain the fall of a government, not in terms of the events which led up to it, but in terms of what it led to. On the face of it this is simply unacceptable. The rules of logic do not allow us to reverse the flow of causality and say that an event A can be caused by an event B which has not yet happened. This form of explanation, which is known as teleological, can only make sense in one of two contexts.

One is if event A is caused by a prior event alpha, which is somebody's intention with regard to the future. We can certainly argue that a government fell because someone wanted to form a different government and thus forced the collapse of the current government. However, intention and effect are two different things: the intention to bring about event B may not in fact be realised, and our action in causing event A may have completely different results. This is generally characterised as "unintended consequences", and we saw last week that it is important in Weber's account of instrumental rationality as a method we adopt as a means to

a particular goal, but which then becomes an end in itself. So an intentional explanation can only work where the person with the intention is in fact not just all-powerful but has total knowledge of the context of their action; in other words, where they are God. Much mediaeval thought is teleological in this sense: events are explained in terms of God's plans for the future of the world.

Apart from intentional explanations, there is one other form of potentially valid explanation in terms of effects, which is the argument known as functionalism, which you are no doubt familiar with in practice; it is represented, for example, by the claim that such-and-such a thing happens "because the economy needs it" or "because of the interests of capital". Note that this is quite different from an explanation in terms of the perceived needs of the economy (as seen by the government, by the electors or by individual managers). It is also different from a simple explanation in terms of compatibility: by definition, if a form of state is incompatible with a form of economic organisation, they will not coexist - but this says nothing about the reasons for their incompatibility or the mechanism which prevents their coexistence.

Strict functionalist explanations are based on an analogy to Darwinian evolutionary theory. This argues in terms of competition for survival in a situation of relative scarcity. Over immense periods of time, genetic mutations and variations will occur. Some of these will be *functional* for survival, in the sense that they will either enable the new individual to survive more effectively or to breed more effectively. From the point of view of genetic reproduction, of course, what matters is that a plant or animal survives long enough to reproduce itself; the better its statistical chances of survival to this point, or the more successful it is at reproduction, the more individuals with this different genetic structure there will be. Over time, in other words, functional mutations will tend to reproduce themselves and spread; less functional mutations will survive less frequently (given competition for the same food etc.) or will be outclassed in terms of reproduction.

This argument does not hold for social explanations, however, for three very important reasons. Firstly, it assumes fixed units such as individual animals; in other words, its natural affinity is with a radical methodological individualism which takes the individual (or some other unit, perhaps the family or the enterprise) not just as the starting-point but effectively as the only reality: which does not examine, for example, the social origins of the individual's ways of thinking and definition of needs, and which does not consider the possibility of *interaction* between, for example, the individual and the family. Secondly, it assumes that, whatever the unit is, it has a means of self-reproduction which is as exact and as stable as genetic transmission. Obviously enough, however, even when firms copy successful firms, they do not reproduce all features of the successful firms, and they cannot; all they do is import what they perceive to be the important features. So we can think of a general diffusion, for example of instrumental rationality, which is *intentional* in nature: people think that it is likely to be effective, and it happens that they are right. But we cannot say that this is a functional process. The continuing history of Anglo-American interest in Japanese management methods is a sufficient example of this: "Japanese management" is not a single fixed entity like a collection of genes, but is transmitted as a series of what may be very differing *assumptions* about its key elements; just as importantly, Anglo-American workers and managers and Japanese workers and managers have different cultural backgrounds, so that the assumption that the firm is a unit which is not influenced by other social realities falls.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, not only do we not have straightforward units, and not only can they not reproduce themselves in a simple fashion, but we have to say that the Darwinian argument of the "survival of the fittest" can only be a metaphoric one when it is applied to society. We could not live like that, even if we felt it was desirable. This can be seen very clearly at the level of "societies": contemporary societies are not disputing a common living space; in fact the economically dominant societies are experiencing a population decline. More generally, conflict between contemporary societies is only very rarely expansionist; even where it is, it is generally a matter of the imposition of a new form of government, but not of the obliteration of the previously-existing society. Even where this is the case, as for example in the population movements of the Migration period around the fall of the Roman Empire, "functionality" is a fairly ambiguous concept. The societies which expanded into the declining Roman Empire were not in general technologically superior to the Romans, or even necessarily economically superior: indeed, their need to migrate may be seen as evidence of the problems they experienced in maintaining their way of life in the regions they originated from. Their superiority was partly demographic, and partly military. In other words, "functionality" in these terms is almost entirely destructive, and tells us very little about features of economic or social organisation.

Modernity?

I've shown how radical relationalism leads to structuralism as a holistic account of society, and also indicated the well-known difficulty that structuralism has with explaining change. The last feature of holism that is worth mentioning here is the concept of modernity expressed in structuralism. This will be fairly brief, because - while structuralism is strongly modernist in its approach, it does not treat modernity as a key term: it is itself modern, but it is not very interested in the specificity of the modern. There are obvious reasons for this: if society consists of a structure of relations deriving from a single key concept, it is hard to see how we can have dramatically different types of society.

This is a problem for Levi-Strauss, who derives the organisation of culture from the biological structure of the unconscious brain, in other words from something which, if it changes at all, does so over enormously long periods of time. Unsurprisingly, Levi-Strauss' work, as was at the time the general practice among anthropologists, was largely devoted to the study of what were seen as "traditional" societies, and his concept of the modern is largely defined against these. To an extent, it seems that he treats the modern as an aberration, an unnatural separation of culture and nature, and doomed to destruction for that reason. This may be appealing as a political position, but it does not really deal with the problem, and later structuralists have tried to show that modern culture can also be analysed in the terms Levi-Strauss uses for "traditional" culture.

Althusser, by contrast, fits modernity into a static typology in which it is effectively simply one variant on a pattern. This derives from his version of Marxism, which replaces the crude version of economic determinism found in vulgar Marxism - the argument that everything else can simply be reduced to the economic - with a more sophisticated analysis of different levels of social life, including the economic, the political and the ideological. Each of these, for Althusser, can be described as "relatively autonomous": in other words, it has a logic of its own, and cannot simply be reduced to the economic. Thus Althusser's model of the social totality is that of a "decentred whole". However, the economic is "determinant in the last instance", in other words, it has the final say. Since "the last instance never comes", though, it is the interaction which is most important. Incidentally, this tension between "determination

"in the last instance" and the insistence that "the last instance never comes" is one of the major theoretical problems of Althusser's holism.

Determination by the economic level expresses itself primarily in the creation of these separate levels and the prioritising of one or the other at different historical periods. In other words, within a given mode of production, it is the economic level which determines which level is dominant in a more immediate sense. In feudalism, the political and ideological levels are dominant; in capitalism, it is the economic level itself which is dominant. In both cases, however, the economic level is ultimately determinant; in other words, it determines whether it will itself be dominant or whether some other level will be.

This makes a certain kind of sense: the economic (for these purposes) can be thought of in terms of the relations of ownership and control. In feudalism, the lord owns the land, but the peasant controls their agricultural production; so the appropriation of the peasants' surplus production by the nobility does not take place within the actual process of production, but as an effect of political or ideological structures which guarantee this transfer. In capitalism, on the other hand, the means of production are both owned and controlled by the capitalist; thus the appropriation of surplus value takes place within the process of production; the society is therefore said to be dominated by the economic. For Althusser, in other words, the difference between modern and other societies is that they represent different possible arrangements of the ownership - control situation.

Thus structuralism is unable to do anything very interesting with the idea of modernity, or indeed of social change more generally; it tends to reduce history either to contingent change without any real meaning or to variations on a theme.

Social movements

Ideology and function

As with social change, so with social movements structuralism has remarkably little to contribute. This derives partly from the "death of the subject": if human agency is simply an illusion, then social movements can be explained either in terms of a functional contribution to social change (particularly in the case of the workers' movement) or, more commonly, as an ideological reaction against social change (particularly in the case of the new social movements).

Political background; the two Marxisms

This weakness derives partly from the interaction of theory with social movements themselves: a good example here is Althusser. Althusser was a member of the French Communist Party (PCF), which was perhaps the most immobile of the major Communist Parties of western Europe, and an organisation which could perhaps be described less as the political wing of the workers' movement than as the congealed wing of the workers' movement. French workers, throughout the twentieth century, participated in a number of extremely radical actions - general strikes, mass occupations of factories, the French Resistance. At the same time, the Communists were by far the most important working-class party, and indeed controlled the main trade union federation and the greater part of the French Resistance. However, the Party was not just a particularly orthodox and dogmatic one - by contrast with the Italian Communist Party, for example - it was also committed to the view,

for most of its history, that radical change was simply not on the cards in France, partly for reasons of economic organisation but particularly because of the post-war situation where, on the one hand, it saw that a take-over of power would be likely to be crushed militarily by the Western Allies, and where, on the other hand, de Gaulle's semi-independent foreign policy, which led to the French armed forces, for example, not being under NATO control, was felt to be the best that could be hoped for. The net result was that, in 1944 - 45, instead of turning the predominantly Communist Resistance into an attempt at taking power, as happened in countries like Yugoslavia, the Party accepted the political realities reflected by the Western Allies' support for de Gaulle. Similarly, in 1968, the Communist-dominated CGT was instrumental in keeping the general strike under control, physically excluding student radicals from the factories where they might have undermined the Party's position, and deradicalising the demands of the strike. In France in particular, 1968 was almost as much a rebellion of the libertarian Left against the PCF as it was a challenge to the state. It is therefore not very surprising to find a Party philosopher keen to exclude any possibility that human agency could actually make a significant difference.

More generally, Althusser's structuralist Marxism can be seen as the logical development of one strand, but only one strand, of Marx's thinking. The other approach, which we will be looking at next week, has come to be described as "Western Marxism", and is more closely associated with social movements and activist parties; the kind of static Marxism practiced by Althusser is associated with parties who are either in power or who, for other reasons, are keen to minimise the possibility of large-scale social action which is not entirely under their control.

Rationality

The meaning of "science"

Structuralism is also of interest in terms of its notion of rationality, or, as it is more usually phrased, its claim to scientific status. Sometimes, this represents a pure positivism in terms of its research methods: the "social facts" are assumed to be out there, to be amenable to pure observation, and analysed on the model of natural science. This kind of thing happens to any theory, and it's not a fault peculiar to structuralist practice. What is rather more interesting is the rationalist version of science represented in much structuralist thought.

We normally assume, when we hear the word "science" in English, that it refers to the natural sciences, or to methods which are based on those of the natural sciences. What generally lies behind this is what we can loosely call an empiricist model of science: science as taking its starting-point from what is believed to be empirical reality, which literally means the reality available to the senses. We can observe and experiment with this reality and attempt to build up valid generalisations about its behaviour. In sociology, this is what is normally meant by arguments about "sociology as a science"; what is commonly argued against it is that the reality we experience is already structured by ideas, such as the idea of time, and that social reality is already mediated by the forms of social interaction, such as language. In each case, it is said, we cannot have a "pure" or unproblematic knowledge of reality.

This "empiricist" model of science can, however, be contrasted with a "rationalist" model of science, which argues that our knowledge of the world is, at least initially, a mental one rather than a real one; the implication being that, in one way or another, we can know reality through thought alone. This programme takes an enormous variety of forms, but two

elements are fairly constant. The first is that, at the end of the day, the most important thing is to think systematically and consistently. The second is that, in general, we will tend to look for a hidden reality underlying and explaining the observable world. In explanation, these two emphases tend to take precedence over what we might call faithfulness to the world as observed or experienced. The latter is pressed into consistency, or the elements which do not fit are discarded. It is summarily "explained" in terms of what are claimed to be the "real", underlying truths of the situation.

Many authors in practice combine elements of both these approaches, and it may be difficult not to: a fairly common-sense understanding of social theory, after all, would say that it aims both at internal consistency and at being an adequate account or explanation of the observed world. But if the two of these are pulling in different directions - if we claim, as does Levi-Strauss, that the real world is unobservable, because it is unconscious, for example - then we will have to come down on one side or the other. Structuralism's claim to be scientific generally comes down on the side of rationalism, in other words of aiming at being systematic and aiming to uncover a hidden reality. Incidentally, this sense of the word "science" is rather more widespread in Continental languages, which are capable of describing literary criticism, theology and so on as "sciences": what is meant is not that they represent an equivalent to physics or chemistry, but that they are systematic in approach. If we add that the hidden reality which is aimed at or discovered is likely to be a mental one (given that the rationalist is explicitly taking their own thought as the starting-point or indeed the totality of all that is known), we can see the fit between this model of scientific rationalism and structuralism as a systematic ordering of mental categories.

Althusser's scientific rationalism is in some ways even more thorough-going than Levi-Strauss's: while he claims that there is a real world out there to which theory in some sense corresponds, scientific method has absolutely no need of empirical verification. Martin Jay summarises Althusser's conception of science very well:

"Science, he claimed, operates on the level of conceptual production in which experimental verification plays no role; it is nonetheless materialist because it posits an ultimate congruence between thought objects and a real world. The raw material for scientific activity is provided by ideological conceptions of the world, the 'facts' that positivists innocently take as the givens of existence." (*Marxism and Totality*, p.401). In other words, scientific activity consists of the progressive refining, rethinking and systematising of everyday ("ideological") knowledge of the world; in Althusser's own practice this takes the form of a scholastic project in which an ever-decreasing selection of Marx's work is examined and rethought in order to produce what is presumably an ever-purer form of scientific knowledge.

Reflexivity

Levi-Strauss' uncertainty principle

The last point that I want to mention in this lecture is, perhaps, a minor one, but it is unusual and perhaps worth bearing in mind. Levi-Strauss, like many subsequent authors, argues for a close analogy between culture and language. Obviously this can mean virtually anything, depending on what we understand the nature of language to be, and Simon Clarke has argued that Levi-Strauss's concept of language does not correspond closely with how linguists either then or now thought about it. One element of Levi-Strauss' linguistic analogy is the argument that we can distinguish between the form and the content of a culture, or of a language. Just