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# **Sociological Self Images**

## **Paradigms and Pluralisms in Sociological Theory**

**1960s-1990s**

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A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Sociology

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the identity and self-understanding of sociology as expressed chiefly in discourses of sociological theory. It takes as its starting point the 'identity crisis' of sociology that began in the 1960s with the demise of structural-functionalism, and continues into the present day.

The thesis consists of three main parts. In the first chapter I discuss the methods by which the history of sociology can be reconstructed. I argue that the issues raised by these historical methodologies shed light on wider issues of sociological identity. In particular, the question of the coherence and openness/closure of sociological approaches is considered.

In the next three chapters, I engage in a close reading of a number of substantive 'manifestos' for sociology, that attempt to delineate an epistemologically privileged space for sociological analysis. These are chosen to exemplify recent trends in sociological analysis including reflexive sociology, structural Marxism, neo-functionalism, structuration theory, sociology of postmodernity, and postmodern feminism. Each manifesto is considered with regard to its own particular merits and difficulties, but is also analysed in terms of a wider pattern of theoretical development. This pattern is termed the dialectic of openness and closure, a process whereby theories construct their arguments by criticising the closures and one-sidedness of previous approaches, only to create new closures themselves, in order to provide compelling explanations of important social phenomena. I argue that even though the emphasis on openness has become greater in recent times, closures are still effected by many sociologically-inspired theorists.

In the concluding chapter, I examine pragmatic philosophies of social science as the logical end-point of the increasing openness of sociological approaches. I argue that these philosophies, if fully accepted, could lead in effect to a liberal approach that contains few critical resources. As an alternative, I suggest that the continuing operation of the dialectic of openness and closure is a good thing for sociology, allowing continued development, whilst still focusing explanatory power.

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# Introduction

It is arguable that sociology has always existed in a state of crisis. Accounts differ as to the causes of this perpetual uncertainty<sup>1</sup>, but a sense of crisis seems a relatively permanent feature of its history<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, there is a strong feeling that in the past three decades, sociology has experienced its deepest crisis yet. Whereas it had once surfed upon the waves created by the dangerous tides of history, finding its productivity at the very locus of conflict<sup>3</sup>, these breakers now threatened to engulf sociology once and for all.

This thesis is an investigation into the recent crisis of sociology. The overarching question addressed here is whether there is some determinate form of inquiry called 'sociology' that can continue to hold a privileged epistemological position, or whether it is instead dissolving into the pluralised field of general social investigations. Thus, the thesis considers whether the crisis of sociology has left its form somewhat intact, or has dispensed with it, as it has historically been constituted, altogether. Consequently, the central meaning of crisis that this thesis focuses on is the crisis of identity.

The method employed for this investigation is an analysis of those works that offer formulations addressing the current state of sociology, and its future. These 'manifesto' statements attempt to carve out a determinate space in which sociological analysis can continue to operate. Although sociology is, of course, a discipline centrally occupied with *research*, this thesis focuses upon the wider *theoretical frameworks* that guide this research. No doubt an examination of sociology that takes research as its analytical starting point might draw quite different conclusions. However, it is an interesting feature of those statements that address 'sociology' as a unified field of inquiry, that they typically focus on the *theoretical* trajectory of the subject rather than its research products. Although noting the somewhat unsatisfactory nature of such an approach, this thesis, in analysing such statements, retains their emphasis on theory.

The sociological manifestos are important for three different reasons. Firstly, as a matter of exposition, they are examined to discover the ways in which different theorists, over the past two to three decades, have constructed sociology in its historical and contemporary forms. Secondly, the self-images offered by these theorists are assessed in regard to the intrinsic coherence or usefulness of their framing of the important tasks for sociological analysis. These two considerations

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Zygmunt Bauman argues that sociology's crisis state results from an inability to control discourse about its subject matter, society (Bauman, 1992: 73). Alternatively, Raymond Boudon suggests that this state results from epistemological doubts about claiming knowledge of a society, whilst being situated *in* that society (Boudon, 1980: 2).

<sup>2</sup> As Norman Birnbaum pointed out in 1975, at every international sociology conference since 1953 there has been a discussion as to whether there is a crisis in sociology (Birnbaum, 1975: 169).

<sup>3</sup> Franco Ferrarotti argues this position (Ferrarotti, 1975: 13).

are then put to use in an examination of the wider question of whether the attempt to stake out a particular space and call it sociology is a move that has continuing validity in our increasingly pluralised and 'post'-disciplinary times. I shall be considering this last question in relation to a pattern of development that I will argue runs throughout all of the manifestos considered here, a pattern I shall call 'the dialectic of openness and closure'.

Of course, this thesis is necessarily selective, and there are many different theorists who could have been considered. However, I hope at least to have focused on texts and authors that would be widely regarded as significant in the development of sociology over the past two and a half decades, and my engagement with these authors is intended to draw out the relevance of this selection.

The thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter One considers some meta-theoretical issues around the reconstruction of the history of a discipline such as sociology. Although it is commonly observed in post-empiricist philosophy of social science that 'histories' of particular domains are always also *theories* of those domains, it is still tempting to think that the discursive field of sociology has a 'natural history'. At best, such a position is problematical, and this is clarified by a consideration of the way in which different 'historical lenses' offer divergent interpretations of the discipline. This chapter focuses on the ideas of Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos, the former of whom has contributed to a new 'common sense' about how to understand developments within many and various intellectual fields. The arguments presented in this chapter set the framework for the analysis of sociological identity conducted throughout the rest of this thesis

Chapter Two launches into a discussion of the selected manifesto statements. Considered here is the work of Alvin Gouldner, who set the scene for this thesis by (famously) announcing the crisis within the major sociological traditions. The remainder of the chapter considers the structural Marxist perspective of Göran Therborn, and the neo-functionalism of Jeffrey Alexander, as responses to this call of crisis that involve contradictory impulses between pluralisation and more orthodox commitments to the sociological tradition.

Chapter Three examines two self-images of sociology that are rather more ambivalent about the past and future of the sociological tradition. Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman both express strong doubts about certain aspects of orthodox sociology. Nevertheless, both theorists remain in some key ways loyal to this tradition, and would be held by many to be distinguished leaders of the discipline at the present time. As such, I consider some of the tensions involved in their role as 'ambivalent spokespersons' for sociology. .

In Chapter Four I explore the work of Ann Game, who amongst all the authors considered, is the most concerned to demonstrate that the sociological tradition is fundamentally flawed. Coming from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, she argues that a completely new mode of analysis, materialist semiotics, presents a more viable alternative to sociology. This chapter also refers to the earlier feminist sociology of Dorothy E. Smith as a point of contrast, Smith herself having attempted to thoroughly re-orient the orthodox sociological imagination.

The concluding chapter, Chapter Five, returns again to the meta-theoretical issues that frame this thesis. The contrast between a 'paradigmatic' and 'pragmatic' sociology is drawn out, and two examples of the recent, stimulating turn to pragmatic social analysis are considered, in the work of Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman. I also examine the work of the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, whose approach has been strongly influential among many postmodern social theorists. These analyses are brought to bear once more on the question of whether sociological theorising has a future as a determinate form, or if it deserves to fade into the background of a more general, pragmatically driven cultural criticism. Whilst the goal of this thesis is to help in the clarification of this issue, and contribute to the debate around it, I hasten to add that this important and taxing problem remains far from resolved by this discussion.

# Chapter One

## Historical Lenses

### *Introduction*

The 'history' of a discipline such as sociology is, inevitably, a contentious matter. Different theoretical or normative approaches tend to construct accounts of the development of the field in which their own antecedents are privileged, and those of others are marginalised, or left out of the frame all together. Underlying these potentially internecine disputes, however, is the wider problem of the appropriate general *form* which historical accounts might take. Although less immediately partisan than those aforementioned disagreements, the formal categories by which each 'historical lens' organises its subject matter themselves exercise an important influence upon the final picture of the discipline in question. It is this influence, that I intend to investigate in this chapter.

Firstly, the goal is to clarify the normative underpinnings of three different methods of historical reconstruction: Thomas Kuhn's *paradigms*, Imre Lakatos' *scientific research programmes*, and the hermeneutically inspired notion of *traditions*. From this analysis, I hope to demonstrate that the choice of a general framework is an inherently evaluative one, and argue that this choice should be made explicitly, rather than merely presumed. Secondly, and more contentiously, I assess the value of these frameworks in terms of their applicability to the recent history of sociology.

The latter task takes the analysis into a philosophically fraught area. From an empiricist perspective, the assessment of historical lenses could be seen as an attempt to develop a framework with which the historian of sociology could avoid 'imposed formalism'. That is to say, the historian should try to make sure that empirical actualities are not distorted or 'squashed' by attempting to fit them into inappropriate frameworks, or 'boxes'. The key point here is that such an approach presumes a pre-structured, fully-formed history that exists independently of any historian's attempts to map it.

At the other end of the philosophical spectrum, the postmodernist emphasis on rhetoric, fluidity and discourse makes it difficult to talk about history at all, in any determinate sense. The notion of a fixed empirical reality that different conceptual histories attempt to map is superseded by the idea that any history tells you more about the present than the past (see for instance Bauman, 1992: 24). That is to say that the categories used by a historian reflect current intellectual and social trends, rather than the constitution of the ostensible 'subject matter'. As such 'history' is created rather than discovered<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This contention has not stopped postmodernist thinkers from reconstructing the history of the modern era in a certain way whether it be in relation to its propensity for grand-narratives (Jean-Francois Lyotard, 1984), the totalising desire of the modern state (Zygmunt Bauman, 1992), or the suppression of difference (Charles Lemert, 1993, among others).

This chapter attempts to operate in the mid-ground between these two positions. In one respect, the approach employed here is sympathetic to the reflexivity of the postmodernist viewpoint. That is to say that part of the intention is to display the foundations of particular historical methods so that their underlying assumptions are visible. However, I do not believe that our general conceptual frameworks are all-determining, and I would argue that the process of interpretation always involves the constructive interaction of a general framework with the somewhat inchoate reality 'out there'. This argument asserts that there is no stable empirical viewpoint that can guarantee the truth of the claims made, but suggests that attempts to assess general frameworks for their veracity are still worthwhile<sup>2</sup>.

The chapter thus proceeds by outlining the frameworks offered by Kuhn, Lakatos, and hermeneutics<sup>3</sup>, and then investigating the advantages and disadvantages of each approach for the history of sociology. My central contention is that the popular approaches of Kuhn and Lakatos are problematic in their application to this history.

### *Thomas Kuhn and Paradigms*

Thomas Kuhn is an interesting academic figure in that although he wrote as a 'professional historian' (Barnes, 1982: 1), his work has had a major impact across a number of disciplines. The importance of Kuhn's theories is testified to by Gary Gutting who writes that Kuhn's major work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) 'has had a wider academic influence than any other single book of the last twenty years' (Gutting, 1980: v).

*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is a methodological work that was produced in 1962 during a period when Kuhn moved away from writing historical case studies and towards producing a more general theory of science (Barnes, 1982: xiii). In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (henceforth TSSR) he attempts to generalise a framework for the study of science that is inspired by the new kinds of questions being asked by historians of science such as Alexandre Koyré, an approach that Kuhn terms 'historiographic' (Kuhn, 1970a: 3). This historiographic method marked an important shift in emphasis, focusing on 'empirical historical study' (Barnes, 1982: 12) rather than offering rationalist analysis, the latter of which had been characteristic of earlier philosophy of science.

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<sup>2</sup> This is an admittedly sketchy philosophical position, but constraints on length restrict me from further elaboration. Like many other thinkers, I hold to some form of 'realism', although not necessarily in so fully-fledged a manner as, for instance, Bhaskar (1975).

<sup>3</sup> I use the term hermeneutics in a loose fashion within this chapter, to refer to a hermeneutically inspired approach that views knowledge in terms of traditions. However, this is only the starting point of my analysis, which I develop in a way that diverges from mainstream hermeneutical approaches.

Even though Kuhn's work was not intended to apply to the history of the social sciences, his approach soon became a popular way of coming to grips with the form of sociology, particularly following the release of the second edition of *TSSR* in 1970. Notable examples of these applications of Kuhn's theory include Robert Friedrichs' *A Sociology of Sociology* (1970) and George Ritzer's *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science* (1980), but many more articles and books appeared that used the notion of 'paradigm' to conceptualise sociology's history and/or contemporary situation. As is clear from Eckberg and Hill's summary of these approaches, there is little agreement among these authors as to what the particular paradigms that constitute sociology are (Eckberg and Hill, 1979). However, all these authors confidently base their analysis in this central Kuhnian concept, and the notion of paradigms has become a somewhat common sense way of conceptualising the discipline of sociology. It is for this reason that it is important to assess the advantages, and difficulties with such an application. Before doing this, though, I will outline Kuhn's central ideas.

Kuhn uses four categories to develop a picture of the process of scientific activity. The first of these is 'pre-science'. Before inquiry into an area becomes 'scientific', early investigation is a 'nearly random activity' (Kuhn, 1970a: 15). Furthermore, as different practitioners investigate the 'same range of phenomena', they will 'describe and interpret them in different ways' (Kuhn, 1970a: 17). Kuhn suggests that the emergence of a large degree of consensus from this initial diversity of approaches is a defining characteristic of scientific inquiry, and perhaps one that makes science unique (Kuhn, 1970a: 17).

This level of consensus defines Kuhn's second category, that of 'normal' science. Normal scientific practice is in one sense, the type of scientific practice envisaged by more traditional philosophers of science. That is to say, it involves the steady accumulation and increasing precision of knowledge (Kuhn, 1970a: 52). However, it sharpens traditional conceptions of science by emphasising that normal scientific practice is guided by a paradigm.

A paradigm is a heuristic device that provides a viewpoint on the world. It is a broad conceptual framework that is shared by a community of scientists and it provides an ontology that can be assumed rather than having to be demonstrated at every juncture (Kuhn, 1970a: 21). It also guides scientists by specifying that a certain subset of phenomena are 'particularly revealing of the nature of things' (Kuhn, 1970a: 25). Typically then, a paradigm includes notions of what sort of things there are, and what sort of things are interesting<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Kuhn concedes in the second edition of *TSSR* (1970a: 174-175) that his notion of paradigm admits of at least two different meanings (although, in one much referred-to article, Margaret Masterman (1970) identifies twenty-one different ways in which Kuhn uses this term). In this piece I have

As such, normal scientific (paradigmatic) research defines some problems as scientific and worthy of inquiry, but sees others as metaphysical, the concern of another discipline or just too problematic to be dealt with at the moment (Kuhn, 1970a: 37). Because of these characteristics, we can see that science conducted using paradigms is both constraining and enabling. On the one hand, it places many problems and phenomena out of the view of the scientist, but on the other it allows scientific research to be focused and cumulative, rather than random and scatter-shot<sup>5</sup>.

The next phase of scientific research is termed 'crisis', in which normal scientific practice is starting to break down. This may occur for a variety of reasons, for instance a particularly convincing observation may call into question a fundamental part of the paradigm, or certain problems may have remained unsolved for a long period of time (Kuhn, 1970a: 82). A crisis will typically be caused by a number of such factors. The most important characteristic of a crisis is that the single-mindedness of normal science is replaced by dissent and disagreement. A theory may fragment into several competing versions (Kuhn, 1970a: 71) and previously standard solutions to problems are called into question (Kuhn, 1970a: 83). During such periods, many different ideas of how to solve the current scientific problems are postulated.

Kuhn suggests that there are three ways in which a crisis can be resolved. Firstly, the existing paradigm may prove capable of containing the problems that precipitated the crisis (Kuhn, 1970a: 84). Secondly, the problem may resist even the 'radical new approaches' and its solution will be postponed until the scientific field develops (Kuhn, 1970a: 84). Thirdly, a new candidate for a paradigm may emerge, and there will be an 'ensuing battle over its acceptance' (Kuhn, 1970a: 84).

It is at this point in his theory that Kuhn challenges progressivist notions of scientific practice (even though in the postscript to the second edition of *TSSR* Kuhn plays down the relativistic aspect of his theory (Kuhn, 1970a: 199-207), this seems to be an important part of his original thesis). A key aspect of this is Kuhn's contention that competing paradigms are incommensurable, that is to say that proponents of different paradigms understand the world in ways that cannot be

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outlined Kuhn's first specification of the term, that is as a 'disciplinary matrix'. I have done so, because as Kuhn specifies it, the other meaning of paradigm, as 'exemplar', is of rather less interest to my project. As an exemplar, a paradigm is an 'acquired similarity' relation that allows scientists to 'solve puzzles by modeling (sic) them on previous puzzle solutions' (Kuhn, 1970a: 189). In his later writings, Kuhn argues that this second sense of paradigm is more important than the first (Kuhn, 1970a: 175). However, an understanding of a paradigm as an exemplar seems to be incompatible with some of the most important aspects of Kuhn's theory, for instance his notions of the incommensurability of paradigms, and gestalt switches.

<sup>5</sup> This view of scientific endeavour is rejected by Karl Popper as being too oriented towards dogmatism and rule-following. For Popper, science is 'essentially critical' consisting mainly of 'bold conjectures' rather than acquiescent dogmatics (Popper, 1970: 55).

reconciled, or reduced to one another. These incommensurable aspects include the way in which different paradigms see different aspects of the world as problematic (Kuhn, 1970a: 148) and the fact that different paradigms may use similar language and concepts but in different ways (Kuhn, 1970a: 149). Most generally, Kuhn argues that, from the viewpoint of each paradigm, the world is a different place constructed from different objects (Kuhn, 1970a: 150).

As paradigms are incommensurable, the debate that is engaged in to decide which paradigm will become hegemonic is not only rational but also political. Kuhn emphasises the way in which inter-paradigm disputes are disputes between communities, and thus involve 'a choice between incompatible modes of community life' (Kuhn, 1970a: 94). This means that the role of persuasion comes to the fore, as 'there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community' (Kuhn, 1970a: 94).

Kuhn's discontinuist orientation is also evident in the fourth category he uses to describe scientific activity, that of scientific revolution. When the new paradigm contender succeeds in converting the majority of the scientific community, a scientific revolution has occurred. The new paradigm will guide scientists to look in different places, and to use different methods (Kuhn, 1970a: 111). However, the change between paradigms cannot be understood in terms of continuity and progress because a scientific revolution alters the 'world' and so there is no stable ground for these concepts to inhere in. As Kuhn states 'familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by unfamiliar ones as well' (Kuhn, 1970a: 111).

This idea is the basis for Kuhn's application of the notion of 'gestalt' switches that occur when a scientist switches paradigm. The notion of a gestalt switch refers to the way that a scientist's way of 'seeing' the world changes when the paradigm changes, so that 'what were ducks in the scientist's world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards' (Kuhn, 1970a: 111). Once this switch has occurred among members of the scientific community, the revolution is over, and scientific practice returns once again to normal science.

### *Assessing Kuhn*

Thomas Kuhn's work considerably advances the debates around the history of knowledge producing disciplines. Firstly, he emphasises the way in which knowledge is constituted structurally rather than in single atomistic pieces such as 'facts', 'theories', or 'observations'. As Alan Chalmers argues, the claim that theories always exist as inter-related structures seems to be a historically accurate one (Chalmers, 1982: 79).

Secondly, Kuhn's emphasis on the structures of knowledge demonstrates the specificity and relative autonomy of theoretical work from the 'real world'. This is a sizeable contribution to a 'post-positivist' view of knowledge in that it rejects simple correspondence between theoretical terms and empirical actualities. Ironically, it is this insight that allows Kuhn's own theoretical viewpoint on history to be relativised, becoming just one way of *constructing* the world rather than an accurate *reflection* of it.

Thirdly, Kuhn's work has been instrumental in the sociologising of the study of scientific practice. His emphasis on the importance of scientific communities has been denigrated by 'harder' philosophers of science as implying that scientific change is a matter of 'mob psychology' (Lakatos, 1978: 91). However, writers such as Barry Barnes have lauded Kuhn's sociological orientation for breaking with the approaches of philosophy of science and examining how scientists actually operated (Barnes, 1982: 12-3).

Fourthly, Kuhn is to be praised for analysing what Friedrichs calls the 'life-cycles' of scientific ideas (Friedrichs, 1970: xxi). That is to say that in his four-part schema of scientific practice, Kuhn provides concepts that give historians a 'handle' upon the way that knowledge develops. This schema also breaks with positivistic notions of continuous, progressive development of knowledge, and highlights the importance of discontinuities in the development of science.

For these reasons, Kuhn's work has been an extremely useful intervention in the 'post-positivist' debate around the nature of scientific knowledge. However, there are important difficulties with applying Kuhn's schema to the history of sociology. The first difficulty with Kuhn's work is its degree of sociological orientation. As I have noted above, *TSSR* does have a sociological aspect, in that Kuhn is interested in the way in which a paradigm forms the basis for any particular scientific *community* (Kuhn, 1970a: 11). However, a wider sociological orientation is something that Kuhn explicitly leaves out of his theoretical framework. When he discusses the crisis in astronomy faced by Copernicus, Kuhn suggests that historical factors such as the 'social pressure for calendar reform' add impetus to the search for new solutions (Kuhn, 1970a: 69). Nevertheless, although Kuhn acknowledges the importance of 'external factors' in scientific change, he leaves them 'out of bounds' of his theory (Kuhn, 1970a: 69).

Friedrichs notes this problem with Kuhn's approach. He points out that although Kuhn alludes to 'subjective' factors in paradigm choice,

at no time does he suggest that any given revolution...might be a function of a wider shift in ethos occurring within the society involved (Friedrichs, 1970: 23).

As such, Kuhn's theory lacks one crucial aspect of a sociological approach - a theorised understanding of how various social structures may affect the development of science. It is a somewhat moot point as to whether 'hard' sciences such as physics are strongly influenced by social forces. However, few sociological theorists in the present day would deny the important influence of social forces in shaping the underlying problematic from which sociological theories take their form. Examples of these claims abound, whether they involve linking the success of structural-functionalism with America's post-war boom, tying the world-historical claims of Marxism to the social formation of certain European nations in the mid-19th century, or wider still, relating the truth claims of Euro-American social theory in the last two centuries to the cultural and economic dominance of Western nations during this period. Consequently, an account such as Kuhn's that does not theorise the influence of the social upon science is lacking a crucial dimension, especially for the history of a discipline such as sociology.

This omission from Kuhn's work is particularly unfortunate in that his emphasis upon the structures that underpin knowledge suggests a fruitful avenue for exploring the interconnections between social forces and knowledge production activities. After all, if knowledge production is governed by certain primary assumptions about the world and its constitution, could it not be the case that some of these assumptions are generated by social forces? In a sociological context, Alvin Gouldner expounds a similar theory that emphasises the 'background assumptions' that guide the work of theorists, assumptions that are connected with the personality and social position of the theorist (Gouldner, 1970: 29-30).

Following my concern with the lack of sociological understanding in Kuhn, is a paradoxically opposite concern with Kuhn's work -- that it lacks a properly theorised sense of the cognitive content of knowledge. These two concerns are antithetical in that, as Geoffrey Hawthorn has pointed out,

if beliefs are externally caused, it seems impossible to see how they can also be rational...And if they are rational, it seems impossible to see how they can be externally caused (Hawthorn, 1987: 6).

Keith Tribe raises the question of epistemology in Kuhn's approach, when he objects to the way in which Kuhn's theories undermine the specificity of theoretical discourse. Tribe argues that in Kuhn's work there is a 'co-presence of two contradictory discourses, the epistemological and the historiographic' (Tribe, 1973: 467). Furthermore, he suggests that the historiographic discourse 'undermines' the epistemological without providing a new theoretical basis to cope with this (Tribe, 1973: 468).

Tribe demonstrates the under-theorised nature of epistemology in *TSSR* by criticising Kuhn's notion of a gestalt switch. For Kuhn, this switch is a transition between incommensurable paradigms, and 'must occur all at once (though not necessarily in an instant) or not at all' (Kuhn, 1970a: 150). To Tribe, the contradictory nature of this description highlights the problem with Kuhn's approach. It seems that although Kuhn understands that a theoretical development 'might in fact take years', he still attempts to theorise this change with the notion of a holistic perception shift in which one picture of the world is instantly replaced by another (Tribe, 1973: 475). By the choice of the gestalt analogy for theoretical shifts, Kuhn glosses over the cognitive aspects of these changes. In other words, the idea of an instant transformation hides the cognitive processes that underlie theoretical shifts.

Evidently then, the epistemological problem with Kuhn's account is that, as Joseph Kockelmans points out, Kuhn 'does not have a convincing explanation for why the sciences develop as they do' (Kockelmans, 1979: 192). In consequence, all Kuhn can say about examples such as the rise of classical mechanics is that 'before Newton, multiplicity of ideas; after Newton uniformity', and can theorise it no further (Tribe, 1973: 471). As Tribe so neatly puts it, without understanding the importance of the cognitive, the explanation for the hegemony of classical mechanics could be that 'Newton was the Stalin of his epoch' (Tribe, 1973: 471).

The next important concern with Kuhn's approach is the appropriateness of its standards of evaluation. Kuhn's work demonstrates the inherently evaluative nature of any reconstruction of the history of science. In an article discussing *TSSR* Kuhn considers a question posed to him by Feyerabend, who asks 'Are Kuhn's remarks about scientific development...to be read as descriptions or prescriptions?' (Kuhn, 1970b: 237). In reply, Kuhn states that 'they should be read in both ways at once' (Kuhn, 1970b: 237). After all, argues Kuhn, his account involves three aspects: identifying modes of behaviour, suggesting that this behaviour serves essential functions, and arguing that in the absence of another way of performing these functions, scientists should behave as they do (Kuhn, 1970b: 237).

There is, however, a wider, more unavoidable evaluation inherent in any reconstruction of the history of science. As Mark Blaug argues, to tell the history of a science presupposes a 'view of the nature of scientific explanation' in relation to what is prioritised as 'scientific' in this history and what is not (Blaug, 1980: 138). Honesty about the criteria for deciding this at least allows others the ability to scrutinise these presuppositions. This point is particularly salient in the case of sociology, because whereas the canon of physics theory is reasonably stable, that of sociology is not, and so being open about these presuppositions becomes all the more vital.

Kuhn's theory clearly involves this wider evaluative element. As I outlined above, Kuhn makes a fundamental distinction between 'scientific' and 'pre-scientific' activity. On the one hand, he argues that 'scientific' activity is marked by a remarkably high level of consensus among practitioners, resulting in highly productive activity. On the other hand, Kuhn suggests that 'pre-scientific' activity involves a multiplicity of viewpoints and is largely unproductive.

One cannot read this in today's context without feeling that a postmodern emphasis on plurality and heterogeneity sits uncomfortably with Kuhn's approach. Raymond Boudon is one sociologist who defends the pluralist persuasion of sociology. He states categorically that 'sociology has never been and will never be Kuhnian' (Boudon, 1988: 757). Boudon argues that in different research situations different paradigms will be more or less appropriate, and that one of the mistakes that sociologists make is to believe that one paradigm can have 'universal value' (Boudon, 1988: 757). As a result, Boudon inverts Kuhn's thesis and states that 'sociology is in a phase of crisis when it pretends to have reached a normal science state and to be led by a unique paradigm' (Boudon, 1988: 769).

Boudon's remarks seem primarily intended to guide sociological research, rather than to help us understand the history of sociology. However, if he is correct in his belief that the strength of sociology lies in its multiplicity, then this means that Kuhn's method of reconstructing sociological history will be inappropriate. After all, Kuhn's approach directs the historian to search for and map normal scientific monopolies in a discipline where such monopolies are neither prevalent nor useful. The result of such a mismatch would surely not be successful history.

At this point, it is worth noting that Kuhn recognises that the discipline of sociology does not fit the schema that he has developed for the natural sciences. In 'Reflections On My Critics' Kuhn suggests that the social sciences may currently be classified as 'proto-sciences', disciplines whose 'developmental patterns' resemble 'philosophy and the arts' even though their practice 'generates testable conclusions' (Kuhn, 1970b: 244). As Bryant (1975: 355) suggests, on this view sociology can be understood as 'multi-paradigmatic', a term developed by Margaret Masterman to refer to a discipline in which there are a number of competing and incommensurable approaches (Masterman, 1970: 74).

It is clearly the case then, that Kuhn accepts the inapplicability of his theory to sociology. However, this admission suggests that there will be problems with the numerous attempts to do just that. After all, if sociology is multi-paradigmatic, how are we to theorise the relations between paradigms? As it is, Kuhn gives us little guidance as to how these interactions can be understood, and thus his theory lacks

the tools required for an understanding of the discipline of sociology. Tribe puts this point rather aptly when he states that

the discursive unity provided by the notion of paradigm simply rules out the evaluation of competing entities as anything other than outsiders, the 'other' of science (Tribe, 1982: 83).

This problematic picture of 'discursive unity' is contributed to by the oddity of Kuhn's approach examined earlier, namely his notion of the 'gestalt switch'. By suggesting that a scientist's perspective switches immediately from one world-view to another, Kuhn implies that these views are total, internally cohesive, and impervious to processes such as leaching, diffusion and cross-fertilisation.

In a related criticism, Jeffrey Alexander argues that schools of thought in sociology do not operate like paradigms with respect to their internal coherence. Alexander maintains that the theoretical work of the members of a sociological school tends to change the theories of the founders of the school, rather than just re-articulating them (Alexander, 1984: 277). Furthermore, these changes are not merely expansions of the original theories, but may in fact involve introducing concepts that are opposed or contradictory to these founding theories, due to the one-sidedness of the original (Alexander, 1984: 277). In light of the aforementioned multi-paradigm nature of sociology, these changes could also be seen as a result of the interchange of ideas between traditions. As such, one must be careful that the transformations in a school over time are not ignored in favour of a less subtle mapping of history that implies that paradigms are non-contradictory totalities.

A number of these difficulties interact to produce one final problem with the application of Kuhn to sociology. In these pluralistic times, the question of what should be included in the discipline of sociology and what should not, has become increasingly contested. It would be useful then, if our methodology of choice could provide some guidance on this issue. Of course, authors such as Steven Seidman have questioned the practice of creating a strictly defined sociological canon, as such canons may constitute 'boundary maintaining strategies' that operate by excluding marginal voices (Seidman, 1994a: 148). Such critiques raise important questions about the androcentric and Eurocentric nature of the sociological tradition as it is currently constituted. However, as Charles Lemert has demonstrated in his *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings* (1993), it is possible to successfully create new, more inclusive constructions of the past history of social analysis, that are nevertheless quasi-canonical, and as such still retain a selectivity as to what is relevant and important, and what is not. In light of efforts such as these, I would argue that there is still some value in looking for principles to guide one's selection.

Unfortunately, Kuhn's theory cannot however help us in this task, in that the one criterion of selection that he offers relates to progress and consensus. He suggests that the sciences are demarcated by their high level of consensus and the way in which this consensus makes their progress easier to see (Kuhn, 1970a: 160-3). However, as the field of sociology is, in his framework, multiparadigmatic, and its progression is not obvious in the way that the progression of the hard sciences is, this criterion is of little use.

It strikes me, furthermore, that Kuhn's theory contains gaps precisely where one might look to find some criteria of selection. That is to say, epistemological and sociological considerations are suggestive possibilities to investigate in this regard, and yet Kuhn does not deal with these aspects of scientific practice in an adequate fashion, thus ham-stringing their use in this area. It is quite feasible to argue, as Tribe does, that this weakness in Kuhn's theory makes its applications 'parasitic' upon already existing histories, leaving them 'powerless to question the terms on which they are constructed' (Tribe, 1982: 83).

We have seen, then, that Kuhn's history has a number of disadvantages with respect to its application to the history of sociology. Although it usefully emphasises the relative autonomy of the cognitive, and began the turn to the sociological analysis of scientific practice, its analyses of these aspects of knowledge production leaves something to be desired, as does its monistic emphasis upon consensus. It is these criticisms that lead me to turn to the work of Imre Lakatos, a theorist whose work is largely a response to that of Kuhn, to discover if his methodology of scientific research programmes can provide solutions to these problematic aspects of Kuhn's work.

### *Imre Lakatos and Scientific Research Programmes*

Imre Lakatos is an important figure in recent philosophy of science, whose work was primarily oriented to the physical sciences (Worrall and Currie, 1978: vii). Outside of this field, Lakatos was also fully engaged with debates in the philosophy of mathematics (Worrall and Currie, 1978: vii).

Lakatos argues that the history of science can be made intelligible by viewing it as the history of scientific research programmes (Blaug, 1980: 144). Research programmes are structures of theories and methodological rules that guide the practice of the scientist. The key defining aspect of a research programme is its 'hard core', a central theoretical perspective which is made "irrefutable" by the methodological decision of its proponents' (Lakatos, 1978: 48). The point of this decision is to allow the programme time to develop theories to deal with problems, instead of finding itself instantly falsified by existing evidence. For Lakatos, the prime

historical example of this is Newton's gravitational theory, which was 'submerged in an ocean of "anomalies"' when it was conceived, and yet with development became an incredibly powerful approach (Lakatos, 1978: 48).

The development of a research programme consists in the construction of a 'protective belt' of hypotheses that are open to adjustment and/or total rethinking for the purpose of protecting the hard core of the theory (Lakatos, 1978: 48). The construction of these 'auxiliary hypotheses' is guided by the 'positive heuristic' of the programme, that is a 'partially articulated set of suggestions or hints on how to change...the research programme' (Lakatos, 1978: 50). This heuristic helps to direct the scientist between all the possible changes that could be made to a programme (Lakatos, 1978: 50)

Research programmes can be categorised as progressing or degenerating, a move that Lakatos describes as injecting 'hard Popperian elements' into their assessment (Lakatos, 1978: 112). A programme is progressing if it 'keeps predicting novel facts with some success' and is stagnating (degenerating) if it 'only gives *post hoc* explanations either of chance discoveries or of facts anticipated by, and discovered in, a rival programme' (Lakatos, 1978: 112). As such, Lakatos argues that the progress of scientific activity is to be judged by the comparison of rival research programmes (Lakatos, 1978: 113). However, there is never a stage when one can finally say that a research programme must be abandoned. A research programme that is 'lagging badly behind' may yet 'stage a comeback' (Lakatos, 1978: 113).

Lakatos' theory can be situated further by reviewing his useful distinction between two types of histories. On the one hand there are 'internal' histories that involve 'normative methodologies' and thus give a 'rational explanation of the growth of objective knowledge' (Lakatos, 1978: 102). On the other hand there are 'external' histories that are 'empirical' and 'socio-psychological', and these can be used to supplement an internal history. However, an internal history provides the core concepts needed to understand the process of science, and external histories must be parasitic upon internal histories if they are to understand the course of scientific development (Lakatos, 1978: 102).

Lakatos' methodology of scientific research programmes (SRPs) is clearly intended to facilitate internal history. It offers a history of science as science (privileged rational discourse) that leaves the things that have blocked science (typically politics) to the less interesting external historians. However, Lakatos feels that his approach also makes for *good* history and he views his account as an advance on Popper's in this respect. According to Lakatos, by Popper's falsificationist standards Newtonian science would have been condemned as unscientific at its outset, and historically speaking would have to be excluded from a history of

*science*, instead being relegated to the status of Marxism and psychoanalysis, two of the main targets of hard philosophers of science (Lakatos, 1978: 125, 135). On the other hand Lakatos' theory can defend the resistance of Newton's project to falsification, as long as the programme continued to make empirical or theoretical progress. As such, Lakatos' methodology attempts to provide both a rational account of scientific development, and avoid ruling out important episodes of science as unscientific by methodological fiat.

### *Assessing Lakatos*

Probably the best way to frame Lakatos' theory is to see it as an attempt to find a path between the rationalist philosophy of Popper and the historically oriented approach of Kuhn. Mark Blaug puts this point by suggesting that 'Lakatos is "softer" on science than Popper, but a great deal "harder" than Kuhn' (Blaug, 1980: 142). Lakatos' approach certainly shares some of the advantages of Kuhn's approach. This similarity is most obvious in the way in which Lakatos views the most important units of scientific history (SRPs) as structures, echoing Kuhn's use of paradigms. This similarity is further sustained by Lakatos' concept of 'positive heuristic' which repeats Kuhn's point that paradigms contain suggestions and hints of how problems encountered may be approached in the future.

A further similarity between the two is that, as Alan Chalmers puts it, both Kuhn and Lakatos 'demand of their philosophical accounts that they stand up to criticism based on the history of science' (Chalmers, 1982: 89). However, Lakatos' approach to history is importantly different to Kuhn's in this respect. It is clear that Lakatos believes science has a privileged status as discourse, a point made evident by his claim that the 'growth of science takes place essentially in the world of ideas...which is independent of knowing subjects' (Lakatos, 1978: 92). As such, the focal point for Lakatos is the ideas produced by science and the rational process of their development.

Conversely, Kuhn's analysis is directed towards the actions of the scientists involved, and the way that their community structure is importantly determinate of the shape of science with respect to the consensus or otherwise of practitioners. Furthermore, Kuhn hands the rationality of scientific choice over to the communities involved, whereas Lakatos wants to keep the final judgement outside of these communities. As a result of this difference, in Lakatos' terms Kuhn's approach looks like an external history of science in that it focuses upon the sociological and community aspects of science. On the other hand, Lakatos' theory is an attempt to provide an internal history, albeit one that is particularly historically sensitive. As a result of this difference in methodology, Kuhn has argued that Lakatos' approach is

too rationalist and aprioristic and has accused Lakatos of performing not history but 'philosophy fabricating examples' (cited in Blaug, 1980: 145). However, as we will see below, Lakatos' rationalistic approach does have advantages.

One important consequence of Lakatos' rationalistic theory is that it is concerned with the assessment of the epistemological content of theories. We can see from Lakatos' emphasis on internal history that he is concerned with, as Tribe puts it, 'the actual nature of scientific discourses' (Tribe, 1982: 86).

This approach has been lauded by a number of writers including Mark Blaug, for whom Lakatos' cognitive criterion for science

begins to provide insight as to why "paradigms" are ever replaced, a mystery which is one of the central weaknesses of Kuhn's work (Blaug, 1980: 144).

Blaug believes that Lakatos' schema can be usefully applied to the history of economics in that the replacement of old research programmes (such as that started by Adam Smith) by new research programmes (such as that proposed by John Maynard Keynes) is explained by the objective superiority of the latter in terms of excess empirical content and predictive ability (Blaug, 1980: 146-154).

However, I have reservations about applying Lakatos' approach whole-heartedly to sociology. I can certainly sympathise with Blaug's view that the emphasis on the objective qualities of SRPs makes the choices of practitioners (rationally) intelligible (Blaug, 1980: 151). Nevertheless, I am inclined to think that criteria such as excess empirical content are not appropriate for the assessment of sociology. While Lakatos' approach may have some utility in the case of a 'hard' science like physics, an activity like sociology does not seem to run along the same lines. As Kuhn has pointed out, although sociology generates testable hypotheses, there is no clear developmental pattern, and as such there is no real basis for suggesting that its history can be characterised in terms of theoretical progress and excess empirical content. Consequently, Lakatos' model of theoretical commitment (which argues that theorists should work with SRPs that are progressing) does not seem to apply to sociologists. In short, it seems that Lakatos' epistemological criteria is not appropriate for reconstructing the history of sociology.

Lakatos' cognitive approach is not altogether irrelevant to sociology, however. Even though sociology may not have identical cognitive patterns to the hard sciences, any understanding of its history must surely account for the influence of cognitive factors. Although every change in sociological theory does not entail increased empirical content, it would conversely be questionable to suggest that sociological theories do not have varying degrees of representational accuracy, instead being explicable only in terms of the political interests of those who follow the theory.

Lakatos' work is thus useful in emphasising the cognitive, even if it does not provide a specific approach viable for sociology.

The same kind of argument applies to Lakatos' criteria for distinguishing science from non-science. As Tribe points out, one chief concern of Lakatos' theory is the problem of 'demarcation', that is providing criteria for what is science and what is non-science (Tribe, 1982: 84). That Lakatos makes this distinction suggests the possibility that his approach could resolve the problem of what to include within a history of sociology, and what to exclude. Unfortunately, Lakatos uses his epistemological criteria to make the demarcation between science and non-science, and as I have already noted, his epistemological criterion is not appropriate for sociology. However, once again, we can still take from Lakatos the importance of making some cognitive distinctions about sociology without accepting his particular criterion. At least then, Lakatos points us in a useful direction, and emphasises an aspect of disciplinary identity that Kuhn does not.

Aside from the advantages of epistemological rigour, Lakatos' approach also seems more historically accurate than that of Kuhn. As I noted above, in Kuhn's theory, scientific practice is for long periods dominated by one particular approach or paradigm. On the other hand, as Tribe notes, Lakatos presents a picture of science in which there is always a 'competitive equilibrium' of research programs and as such 'some diversity is admitted to the pursuit of research' (Tribe, 1982: 87). The view that there are always competing alternatives seems appropriate to the history of sociology which, even at its most focused appears to have contained a number of different approaches<sup>6</sup>.

However, Lakatos' approach still reproduces one of the central flaws of Kuhn's approach. As Tribe argues, although Lakatos encourages us to see the diversity of options open at any one time, by categorising history into competing SRPs he characterises these structures as 'logical totalities' (Tribe, 1982: 88). As a result, the historian is less likely to see the interchanges and fluidity that characterise scientific thinking. Once again, the history of science is written as the history of incommensurable, autonomous blocks of thought working through their own logic (Tribe, 1982: 87), rather than a history in which there is interchange and synthesis. This model of scientific change as discrete and endogenous is further reinforced by Lakatos' suggestion (echoing Kuhn) that SRPs contain within them guidelines for their development. Such a model fails to acknowledge that the impetus to develop comes from without (other SRPs, changes in the world) as well as within.

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrichs argues this point, suggesting that even during the height of structural functionalism other approaches existed, such as ethnomethodology and dramaturgy (Friedrichs, 1970: 17-19).

So far, we have considered the epistemological and historical aspects of Lakatos' approach, and found that, although flawed, his work provides some useful corrections to Kuhn's approach. However, there is a serious problem with Lakatos' work with respect to his sociological understanding of disciplinary history. In short, because of the emphasis that Lakatos places on rational history of science, he underestimates the influence of external, sociological factors. In fact, for Lakatos a history is weak if it relies too much upon external factors to explain the behaviour of scientists (Lakatos, 1978: 134). This cuts against sociological theorists who try to understand the history of science with categories based centrally in sociological rather than rational concepts. Lakatos believes that such sociological theories collapse under 'historiographical scrutiny' (Lakatos, 1978: 135).

Unsurprisingly, the situations that Lakatos singles out as legitimate examples of external history demonstrate that his sense of the sociological is weak. He suggests that internal history cannot explain occurrences such as the disappearance of Mendelian genetics in the USSR, or 'why certain schools of research into genetic racial differences or into the economics of foreign aid came into disrepute in the Anglo-Saxon countries in the 1960s' (Lakatos, 1978: 114). These examples suggest that the only notion of sociological influence that Lakatos can conceive is that of direct (in the latter two cases left-wing) social intervention into scientific research programmes to halt their progress. What remains unexamined is the social forces that produce these research agendas and frameworks in the first place. To take the example of research into genetic racial differences, Lakatos does not question the basis of such research in racist, colonial assumptions about natural differences between whites and non-whites. As such, he has a limited understanding of the way in which social formations provide the basic frameworks for the questions asked by science.

I would suggest that it is crucial to consider the context that society provides in reference to the history of sociology. This means looking at the way in which particular societies frame the questions asked, but also looking at the way in which certain historical circumstances raise particular issues as problematic. An example of the latter is the turn of sociology to economic theory in the 1970s, a process encouraged not by the rational reworking of theories in a social vacuum, but rather the crises in many Western economies during that period (Swedburg, 1987: 120). Without considerations such as these, a historical methodology is crucially limited in its application to the history of sociology.

As a consequence of these criticisms, I would now like to turn to the hermeneutically inspired concept of tradition. I will be arguing that this concept helps

to provide a balanced understanding of the epistemological, historical and sociological aspects of knowledge production.

### *Hermeneutics and Tradition*

Hermeneutic philosophies have existed for a number of centuries, and were initially developed to aid the interpretation of important texts such as the Bible, and documents of Roman law (Diesing, 1991: 104). These approaches were used to negotiate disagreements about meaning and interpretation, particularly in reference to important and contentious documents, in contexts removed from their production. However, in recent times, the post-structuralist emphasis upon the non-'presence' of meaning in texts has expanded the realm of hermeneutics, suggesting its relevance in the interpretation of all texts, and emphasising the textual/interpretative aspect of all social life.

Although there are a number of different and inter-linked traditions that might appropriately be termed hermeneutic, one of the most central is that line of thinking based on the work of Heidegger and developed by his pupil Gadamer (Outhwaite, 1987: 61). Habermas has been importantly influenced by this tradition, and at least according to William Outhwaite, it was Habermas' Critical Theory that introduced the term 'hermeneutics' to the English speaking world (Outhwaite, 1987: 61). Although hermeneutics involves a diverse range of commitments in different debates, I shall be concentrating here on those aspects of hermeneutics which contribute to the understanding of cultural history.

The key historical concept in hermeneutics is tradition. An interest in tradition, according to Gadamer, is what differentiates the 'human sciences' from the 'natural sciences' (Outhwaite, 1987: 65-6). Furthermore, Gadamer's emphasis is on 'cultural traditions as the locus of understanding' (Outhwaite, 1987: 67). This concern with traditions is also the central focus of Jeffrey Alexander and Paul Colomy's 'postpositivist' approach to knowledge, in which they reject positivist models of knowledge accumulation in favour of arguing that 'traditions are the critical units of analysis for assessing the cumulation of social scientific knowledge' (Alexander & Colomy, 1992: 28).

The concept of tradition can be usefully defined as a structured and historically explicated set of conceptual tools for viewing the world. Alexander and Colomy argue that a social scientist's perception is necessarily mediated by a tradition and its 'standardised, paradigmatic forms' (Alexander & Colomy, 1992: 36). As such, social reality can never be 'confronted in itself', although if a scientist is familiar with different traditions there is nothing to bind them to any single perspective (Alexander & Colomy, 1992: 36).

Starting from this basic conception, the notion of tradition can be extended in two ways, depending on whether or not one wishes to emphasise the cognitive aspects of traditions. Here, I shall consider Richard Rorty's work as an example of a non-cognitive approach to traditions, and then outline the theories of Nisbet, and Alexander and Colomy, to demonstrate the cognitive approach.

Richard Rorty is famous for his pragmatist philosophy, which has come of age in a time when his non-universalistic approach chimes in with dominant postmodern themes of specificity and situation. He does not favour the term tradition, but his comments on culture and language can easily be applied to the notion of tradition. Rorty uses two metaphors to characterise the history of culture, the first of these being Mendelian (non-teleological) evolution. On this view, the history of culture is constituted by 'memes', that is cultural elements that compete in an evolutionary fashion for the 'available cultural space' (Rorty, 1991b: 4). From this perspective traditions can be seen as 'batches' of memes that are bundled together but forever evolving and interchanging (Rorty, 1991b: 4). This evolution can also be viewed in terms of Rorty's other main metaphor, that of 'cultural conversation' in which different traditions interact as strands of conversation that are not fixed but evolve along with one another (Rorty, 1979: 318-9).

The fact that Rorty views cultural change as non-teleological illustrates his rejection of the idea that traditions bear generalised cognitive content. That is to say, he does not view the history of culture as the history of progressively more accurate knowledge. In that Rorty 'drop[s] the appearance-reality distinction', he also rejects the idea that certain traditions may be more or less representative of reality (Rorty, 1991b: 4). This meshes with his view that a tradition such as philosophy has no essential cognitive characteristics. As he states in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* 'philosophy...is just whatever us philosophy professors do' (Rorty, 1991a: 220).

An alternative way of viewing traditions is to see them as bearers of cognitive value, which moves the concept some way from the strongly interpretative aspect of the term as it is used in hermeneutics. Robert Nisbet views 'the sociological tradition' in this way, as an 'intellectual tradition' that has a 'nucleus or core of ideas' which distinguishes it from other disciplinary traditions (Nisbet, 1970: vii). The project of his major work, *The Sociological Tradition* is to identify 'what is conceptually fundamental and historically distinctive in the sociological tradition' (Nisbet, 1970: vii). For Nisbet, this central nucleus does not determine or include all sociological work, but is the core which has sustained sociology for 'more than a century' (Nisbet, 1970: vii).

Jeffrey Alexander and Paul Colomy find it more useful to divide sociology up into a number of different traditions than to view it in terms of a few essential

characteristics (Alexander & Colomy, 1992: 28, 35). However, like Nisbet, they assert the importance of seeing traditions in terms of their cognitive value, as their approach is intended to assess the 'cumulation' of knowledge, and without a cognitive focus this could not be done (Alexander & Colomy, 1992: 29). It is in this light that Alexander and Colomy see hermeneutics à la Rorty as too relativistic, and they comment that such an approach can 'lead to a dangerous and enervating distrust of reason itself' (Alexander & Colomy, 1992: 32-3). Instead they insist that social scientific traditions cannot be understood without reference to their cognitive content.

### *The Advantages of Traditions*

I would now like to develop this notion of tradition further, and in doing so I hope to demonstrate that it is a useful tool for analysing the history of sociology. We have seen that 'tradition' is a flexible concept that can encompass different emphases (for instance cognitive vs non-cognitive). In this section I will be arguing that it is precisely this flexibility that makes the hermeneutic approach superior to the those of Kuhn and Lakatos for the understanding of sociological history<sup>7</sup>.

In the first place, the concept of tradition provides a structured unit of analysis, and consequently preserves this useful feature of the other approaches considered in this chapter. Alexander and Colomy argue that traditions should be seen as having 'theoretical cores' that are 'highly resistant to change', which closely links the concept to that of Lakatos' research programmes (Alexander & Colomy, 1992: 36). As we saw earlier, this structured approach highlights the relative autonomy of theoretical work from 'the real', and emphasises the way that theoretical frameworks *produce* pictures of the world.

Secondly, by basing historical study in a hermeneutic framework, the historian is less likely to seek singularity in the fashion advocated by Kuhn. That is to say, the notion of interpretation is based upon the idea that different perspectives intermesh with the object of inquiry in different ways, producing different results. As a result the hermeneutic approach encourages us to see the history of sociology as a number of different attempts to come to grips with social activity. Consequently, plurality is the base-line of hermeneutics, not singularity.

This emphasis on the multiplicity of approaches improves on Kuhn's monistic model, and matches Lakatos' insistence on the plurality of approaches within disciplinary history. However, the concept of tradition has a further advantage over Lakatos' approach. Whereas Lakatos characterises research programmes as strictly segregated blocks of theory, the hermeneutic approach suggests that as traditions

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<sup>7</sup> One might note the historical irony of the work produced by sociology being comprehended as traditions, considering that the shift from 'tradition' to 'rationality' was one of the most basic launching points of sociological thought.

evolve they interchange concepts and approaches. Habermas makes this point in relation to theoretical languages when he argues that they 'are not sealed off but are porous' (cited in Diesing, 1991: 120). Furthermore, Habermas argues that languages grow 'by absorbing concepts from other languages' (in Diesing, 1991: 120). These remarks should sensitise a historian to the way in which traditions change and grow through inter-relations and cross-fertilisation rather than in secretive isolation from one another. As Alexander and Colomy put it, 'the boundaries linking and separating paradigms are regularly subject to reassessment' (Alexander & Colomy, 1992: 41). Perhaps the most obvious example of a continually evolving tradition is that of Marxism, which has had productive theoretical syntheses with many other traditions of social thought.

One of the most important advantages of using the concept of tradition is the flexibility it gives in assessing historical *change*. We considered earlier Lakatos' useful distinction between internal and external history, that is whether a history focuses on rational/cognitive forces as motivating change, or sociological/historical forces. Within this scheme, Lakatos' work constitutes an internal history, with its argument that the history of science is the history of (rationally) progressive research programmes, and Kuhn's work is something approaching an external history, focusing on the community structure of science and the motivating force of consensus. The advantage of using the notion of tradition is its ability to focus on either of these aspects, so that historical changes can be seen sometimes as sociologically motivated, or contextually specific, and other times primarily as cognitive developments, or cognitive regressions. Consequently, it can be used to cut through a strict internal/external divide.

I have argued above that changes to traditions will not always be explicable in cognitive terms, and consequently sociological factors will have to be considered. However, as we have seen, neither Lakatos nor Kuhn provides a very satisfactory analysis of such factors, and I will briefly consider some of these factors, and how they influence the course of traditions. According to Alexander and Colomy sociological factors fall into two main groups, the first of these being the dynamics between traditions. The most basic dynamic is competition, which is a primary motivator for the development of traditions, driving theorists to find newer and better accounts of the world (Alexander and Colomy, 1992: 39-42). However, sociological dynamics may also 'impede genuine knowledge cumulation' (Alexander and Colomy, 1992: 44). For example, when a tradition becomes fashionable it may temporarily avoid being accountable for the criticisms made against it (Alexander and Colomy, 1992: 44). Another such case occurs when arguments between traditions become 'highly polarised', and the stereotypes presented by each side confound the

adequate exchange of ideas that is necessary for development (Alexander and Colomy, 1992: 45).

The other kind of sociological factor that affects the development of traditions is that of the broader social context. As Alexander and Colomy argue, changes to traditions are often not due to cognitive factors, but rather due to 'significant social and global developments' (Alexander and Colomy, 1992: 38). They suggest that the social context will strongly influence initial theoretical commitments, and that theoretical and empirical development may only follow afterwards (Alexander and Colomy, 1992: 38). I would put this point more strongly, and argue that the social context is a constant influence on traditions, always intertwined with theoretical developments.

As we have seen, there are a number of advantages to a hermeneutical approach to history. However, there is one important problem that a hermeneutic approach cannot clearly resolve, and that is the problem of demarcating sociology from non-sociology. Alexander and Colomy make a tentative definition, stating that sociology is

a multilevel rational discourse about society and its constituent units, with the patterns and directions of that discourse being conditioned by the discipline's leading traditions (Alexander and Colomy, 1992: 35).

Unfortunately, for the purposes of demarcation this definition is circular, in that the discipline is considered to be constituted by the traditions that are in that discipline. Furthermore, the first part of the definition is really too vague to exclude much work from what are ostensibly 'other' fields of inquiry such as economics, and anthropology.

Of course, the question of what constitutes 'sociology' can be approached both sociologically and epistemologically. The advantage of a tradition-based approach is that it can adapt to either sociological or epistemological definitions of the discipline. That is to say that within the framework of traditions, it can be accepted that the canon is primarily the result of social selection, operating to exclude certain social groups and the insights of other disciplines, in an effort to create an identity for itself. On the other hand, it could be that the canon is based around a certain type of cognitive insight, an insight that is the criterion by which certain traditions of thought are included, and others are excluded. The correct answer probably lies in some combination of these factors. However, the main point is that although the framework of traditions does not help us to decide this issue, it is open enough to embrace both of these possibilities.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of my chapter has been to explore and assess the different general models that one might use to reconstruct the history of sociology. I have been emphasising the ways that these frameworks produce different pictures of sociology, and represent different attitudes towards epistemological, historical, and sociological analysis. In relation to Kuhn's work, I argued that although it usefully emphasised the sociological aspect of knowledge production, it was lacking in tools for analysing epistemological issues. I then turned to the work of Lakatos, who provides important concepts for understanding the epistemological status of knowledge, but whose work has a very weak sense of the sociological. Finally, I developed a framework based around traditions, which I argued more successfully balanced these different aspects of a historical analysis.

The key point here is the flexibility of the notion of traditions. While using a concept such as 'tradition' allows a historian to conceptually divide up the history of sociology, and thus impose form upon it, it avoids two mistakes that are made by the approaches of Kuhn and Lakatos. The first mistake is that of under-estimating the constructive power of the historian, that is the failure to see that units such as paradigms or research programmes *produce* a view of history. The consequence of this is the erroneous belief that the clearly delineated form used by the historian refers to a clearly delineated reality. This leads to the second historical error, the failure to see that the history of theories involves constant interchanges, pilferings and mutual influences, rather than a pattern of growth that is endogenous to each paradigm or research programme. A history conceptualised in terms of traditions avoids these errors by taking a more consciously interpretative stance, and acknowledging that the concept of 'tradition' only loosely delineates a theoretical grouping within a complex reality.

The other main advantage of the tradition-based approach to history outlined here is its ability to embrace, and switch between the epistemological and social influences upon knowledge. It is left as an open question whether changes to traditions result from cognitive developments/regressions or social influences (or more likely, a complex combination of both), and as such it does not commit the historian to search for the ever-increasing progress of knowledge *or* to reduce all theoretical developments to the interests of particular social groups.

At this point, the reader may be wondering whether the hermeneutic approach only seems attractive because of its 'fuzziness', and there is some truth in this. However, I would argue that it is this very characteristic that is the concept's strength, in that it backs away from precise delineations and sharp epistemological judgements, whilst still enabling the historian to make some determinate claims about the history of

sociology. It is worth reiterating a point made earlier, that the approach discussed here, although inspired by hermeneutics, is not commensurable with any 'strong' version of this contextual approach. The tradition-based approach might be best understood as a compromise between a fully-blown hermeneutics in which formal categories are rejected in favour of a completely interpretative approach, and the theories of Kuhn and Lakatos, which I have argued are too formalistic in their use of categories such as 'paradigms' and 'research programmes'.

At the end of the last section, I pointed out that understanding sociology in terms of traditions could not resolve the difficult problem of what should be included and excluded from a history of the sociological tradition. The next three chapters of this thesis will consider theories that address this question from a different angle, and these chapters proceed by examining manifestos that delineate a space for sociology, and assess its possibilities for the future. One of the questions underlying this approach is whether the attempt to clearly distinguish 'sociology' as different from other forms of social analysis still constitutes a useful and attainable goal. I will investigate this question further in Chapter Five, but my central argument is that although many of these approaches have a strong commitment to 'opening up' the field of sociological analysis in order to embrace a new plurality of theories, these manifesto statements still produce closures that attempt to privilege particular forms of analysis. I shall term these latter kind of moves 'paradigmatic' to parallel them with Kuhn's work, with which they share two underlying assumptions: (i) that sociology can be understood as an autonomous block of approaches that can be clearly separated from other fields of study; and (ii) that in the field of sociological analysis, consensus, coherence, and monism are superior to plurality. Clearly, as I have argued within this chapter, when these assumptions are strongly held, sociology misconceives its operation and nature. However, I shall be arguing that sociological approaches almost inevitably hold some version of these assumptions.

In the next chapter I shall be considering three manifesto statements for sociology that constitute early responses to the demise of structural functionalism in sociology. I shall be arguing that after Alvin Gouldner set the picture by announcing the arrival of a crisis within sociology, theorists such as Göran Therborn and Jeffrey Alexander attempted to negotiate a different place and posture for sociology in the newly opened-up field of discourse about society.

## Chapter Two

### The Call of 'Crisis' and its Responses

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I will be considering three manifestos that address the state of sociology. The first of these is Alvin Gouldner's *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970), which was a key discursive marker of the state of uncertainty that sociology was entering into. Gouldner argues that neither of the existing traditions central to sociology, Marxism and academic sociology, can provide a holistic sociological approach. His work is important in that his critique of existing approaches opened up the field of sociological analysis and posed the key question: where to from here? Gouldner's own answer is a remarkably prescient one, although not without its difficulties.

The remainder of the chapter considers the fortunes of the two sociological traditions that Gouldner critiques. From a Marxist perspective, I consider the work of Göran Therborn whose *Science, Class and Society* (1976), capitalises upon the disarray of sociology to argue that Marxism provides the superior scientific approach to society<sup>1</sup>. With respect to Therborn's approach, I shall be arguing that it contains an important tension between its claims to scientific status on the one hand, and its conventionalist approach on the other. I shall also investigate the question of why structural Marxism became a key focus of sociological discussion rather than another prominent post-functionalist trend, namely conflict theory.

Finally, I shall consider the manifesto offered by Jeffrey Alexander whose work comes from a neo-functionalist perspective. In *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982-4), Alexander argues that sociology can be revitalised by a re-assessment of its theoretical base. To this end, he reconsiders the work of the leading figures in the sociological tradition, arguing that Talcott Parsons' work represents the most clear expression yet of sociology's synthetic ambitions. As with Therborn's work I shall note the tension between Alexander's conventionalist epistemology and his reach towards objectivity. Furthermore, I shall question the validity of attempting a solely analytical solution to sociology's current difficulties. I conclude the chapter by noting important shared features of the apparently opposed traditions of Marxism and functionalism.

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<sup>1</sup> There is clearly a terminological difficulty (at least) here. As we shall see, Therborn defines Marxism as a separate cognitive activity from sociology, and thus views the two activities as clearly distinct. However, regardless of the fact that some authors uphold the qualitative distinction of these two approaches (see for instance, Swingewood, 1991: 2-3), I would argue that although distinctions can be made between Marxist and non-Marxist sociology, Marxism can, in general terms, be better conceptualised as a specific instance of the general form of sociological analysis. This argument is particularly defensible in the case of structural Marxism, which, acknowledging the relative autonomy and influence of the political and ideological levels, prioritises the key 'civil society' factors that writers such as Swingewood see as the basis of a sociological approach. For the purposes of simplicity, then, my discussion of Therborn's work will follow his practice of referring to Marxism and sociology as distinct approaches, but in the wider thesis I shall (unless otherwise specified), use the term 'sociology' to encompass both Marxist and non-Marxist sociological approaches.

### *Gouldner and the Crisis of Sociology*

*The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, by Alvin Gouldner, appeared in 1970. It is a lengthy tome that encompasses a broad range of topics, and is not easily summarised. Here, I shall focus upon Gouldner's version of the history of sociology, the causes of its perceived malaise, and his conception of its future.

Gouldner's historical account is based upon his contention that, after its inception in the work of Saint-Simon, sociology went through a 'binary fission' (Gouldner, 1970: 111). This fission resulted in two strands of sociology that have been separated ever since, strands that Gouldner identifies as academic sociology and Marxism. These two sociological traditions can be distinguished from each other both theoretically and geographically.

On the one hand, academic sociology followed Comte's positivistic approach, which enshrined the process of 'map-making', emphasising objectivity and detachment over practical social intervention (Gouldner, 1970: 102). It became the 'university sociology of the middle class', that found its largest institutional base in the United States (1970: 111). According to Gouldner, the most recent instantiation of academic sociology is the functionalist approach, which having been developed by Durkheim, reached its apotheosis in Parsons' structural-functionalism. Gouldner argues that Parsons' approach is 'fundamentally conservative', and aligned with middle-class interests, leaving it with no desire for radical social change (1970: 157).

On the other hand Marxism made a decisive break in social thought by aligning itself with the initiative and determination of the working class, and affirming the 'unity of theory and practice' (1970: 111-112). Consequently, whereas academic sociology was taken up in those countries where the move to industrialization had occurred early and had been speedily effected, Marxism was to be most influential in 'underdeveloped or more slowly developing regions' as well as with the disaffected among industrial societies (1970: 112-3).

Gouldner argues that this split in sociological thinking left both traditions of thought one-sided (Gouldner, 1970: 112). Whereas Marxism focuses on societal conflict and the involvement of the social thinker in society, academic sociology focuses upon order and believes in the 'scientific detachment' of social thinkers (1970: 112). Furthermore whereas Marxism problematizes economic issues, academic sociology operates under the presumption that economic concerns are not of primary importance for understanding social order (1970: 94). Thus, for Gouldner, the history of sociology is characterised by two distinct strands, each incomplete in themselves. However, he suggests that certain conditions on each side of the sociological split were bringing about the potential for reconciliation. It is these conditions that Gouldner identifies as causing the crisis of Western sociology.

*Sociology: Its Crisis and Future*

For Gouldner, a crisis does not entail the end of a system. Rather, it implies sharp conflicts and tensions that may produce a complete change of character for this system (Gouldner, 1970: 341-2). According to Gouldner there are strong forces such as these at work within both academic sociology and Marxism. In particular, he argues that each of these approaches is being pushed in the direction of the other. With respect to academic sociology, the forces involved are those of state-funding and wider changes in the social structure of society.

Firstly, functionalism, as the dominant sociological approach, is not oriented to the demands of state funding agencies. Gouldner argues that the U.S. government had recently increased funding of the social sciences so that the Welfare State could harness this knowledge in an 'effort to solve the problems of...industrial society' (1970: 345). However, functionalism is not oriented towards such problem-solving as it has traditionally argued that society 'spontaneously' produces 'adaptive mechanisms' to 'restore order and equilibrium', which is of little use to those who want to directly intervene in the process of society (1970: 346). Furthermore, being a general, analytic theory, functionalism makes no substantive commitments as to *which* particular variables in a system are most important for 'determining the state of the system as a whole' (1970: 347). As a result, it can make no concrete suggestions about the specific arenas within which government departments should intervene.

The result of these pressures has been a move away from functionalism in two directions, the first being more practically oriented systems theories such as cybernetics, and decision theory (Gouldner, 1970: 346), and the other being a move towards conflict theories and economic analysis (1970: 351). These latter developments take functionalism squarely in the direction of Marxist analysis.

The other major process that Gouldner sees as undermining functionalism is a shift in the social infrastructure. He argues that theories are elaborated at a technical level and have relative autonomy with respect to their 'internal' development (1970: 397). However, they are also anchored in the 'infrastructure' of society, and when this infrastructure changes, old theories may become obsolete, and out of touch with society (1970: 397-8). It is precisely this kind of shift that has made functionalism seem outmoded, and the particular development in question is the emergence of the 'New Left'. Gouldner characterises the New Left as a loosely grouped political movement including positions such as black liberation, the anti-war movement, and humanist Marxism. The formation of these movements challenges the basic assumptions of functionalism, and, in the new climate, its theoretical tenets come to appear 'manifestly unconvincing' (1970: 397-8). In this changed political arena, new theoretical alternatives become more attractive, and Gouldner outlines the rise of

Goffman's dramaturgy, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, and Homans' exchange theory, as more contemporary and socially resonant responses to different aspects of the current political climate (1970: 396).

Having concluded that functionalism is in a state of uncertainty, Gouldner goes on to suggest that Marxism is in a similar position. He argues that as with the functionalist crisis, the crisis of Marxism is largely due to the conflicts and problems within its social base, that is the Soviet Union (1970: 450). For one thing, whilst Marxism can provide a basis for the critique of bourgeois society, it is more difficult to use it to criticise an established communist state (1970: 451). After all, Marxism is a revolutionary theory, and when the revolution has occurred, it offers little in the way of further social critique. This problem is compounded by the way in which the Soviet state uses Marxism as an iconic rubber stamp to legitimise its policies, rather than deriving its course of action from it. As a result, Marxism in the East lacks its pre-revolutionary critical edge.

Pressure for a move away from Marxism also comes from a different source, those in the state who are concerned to maintain the current social order. Gouldner argues that as these groups develop an interest in conservatism and consensus, Marxism becomes less theoretically attractive, and functionalism can provide a more suitable alternative, with its conception of societies as systems that equilibrate themselves (1970: 457). Ironically, this move to functionalism may even be a liberal shift for Soviet society, as a renewed emphasis on spontaneous stabilizing mechanisms could mean a parallel loosening of the centralised controls currently employed to reproduce Soviet society.

Consequently, Gouldner claims that both sides of sociology are undergoing a crisis. Furthermore, the forces that have brought about these crises are acting to bring the two sides closer together, pushing academic sociology in the direction of conflict theory, and conversely pushing Marxism in the direction of order and consensus. Gouldner argues that the result of a greater interchange between the two is uncertain. On the one hand, both America and the Soviet Union currently have an interest in developing sociology as a purely instrumental tool for the use of the respective administrations (1970: 474). Gouldner terms this possibility administrative sociology, that is a sociology that aims to 'protect and strengthen the existent master institutions of its society rather than examine them as a source of the society's problems' (1970: 475). In other words, administrative sociology does not challenge the basic framework that is set by the status quo, and in this respect sees itself as neutral and apolitical. Instead, its goal is to provide the technical means for the powers that be to keep society stable. At its most conservative, administrative

sociology involves an abandonment of a humanist viewpoint, and a move to 'a culture dominated by spiritless technicians, useful and usable creatures' (1970: 474).

According to Gouldner, the other, more optimistic, possibility for sociology is that there will be a move towards reflexive forms of theorising. A 'reflexive sociology' would be more radical in orientation than administrative sociology, in that it situates sociologists in the world in which they live (Gouldner, 1970: 489). As such, sociologists must seek to examine and change themselves in the same way that they advocate change in society 'out there', a goal that Gouldner terms 'praxis' (1970, 494).

Situating sociologists in this way would, to Gouldner's mind, have two key advantages. The first would be to discourage sociologists from taking a technocratic or administrative position with respect to those that they study (Gouldner, 1970: 490). That is to say that if sociologists view other members of society in the same way that they view themselves, they will be discouraged from seeing other members of society as objects to be manipulated.

The second advantage of a situated sociology is that it would acknowledge that it is not yet free of the fetters that restrict the production of true knowledge. Gouldner argues that if and when sociologists do examine their social position, they will realise that those who have funded sociology and brought about its institutionalisation are the same people that pervert sociology's 'quest for knowledge' (Gouldner, 1970: 498). In a powerful turn of phrase, Gouldner states that 'every social system is bent upon crippling the very sociology to which it gives birth' (1970: 498). An example of how those in power warp the sociological project is the way in which an administration asserts control over sociologists by distributing rewards such as research funding, academic positions and personal income (1970: 498). As such, it is up to reflexive sociologists to become aware of these shackles and transform their practice by challenging authorities in their own sphere, the university (1970: 503-4).

The other important point that Gouldner makes about reflexive sociology is that, although it would be critically oriented towards the powers that be, it would not be only negative in its claims. It would also offer better alternatives to the faults of the present and envisage possible utopias (1970: 503-4).

### *Gouldner's Reflexive Sociology: New Self-Awareness or Navel Gazing?*

The summary of Gouldner's work offered here cannot do full justice to his wide-ranging and complex analysis, and it is important to emphasise the full extent of his achievement. He focused attention very sharply upon the uncertain state of sociology, and forcefully articulated the argument that sociology's two central

traditions no longer provided convincing analyses. In doing so, he raised the important issue of what form sociology should take, now that these traditions were in crisis. Furthermore, the alternative identity for sociology that Gouldner offered, reflexive sociology, was extremely prescient in that it is remarkably similar to recent postmodern critiques of sociology. One might point out that the themes offered in work such as Zygmunt Bauman's (1992) 'new and 'exciting' critique of the links between government and the 'legislative' mode of sociology are largely pre-figured in Gouldner's work. Thus, in many ways, Gouldner's manifesto impressively sets the stage for the development of sociology from 1970 onwards. Nevertheless, there are certain difficulties with his approach.

One of the central problems with Gouldner's analysis is the framework within which it is based. Even though his history of sociology contains nuanced discussions of the complex relations between different aspects of sociology and the social forces present at the time, Gouldner claims that the history of sociology can best be understood in a strictly dichotomous fashion. Furthermore, it is this idea of separation and potential reconciliation upon which Gouldner hangs the rest of the analysis in his book. The question remains as to whether this is an appropriate interpretation of the history of sociology.

In the first place, Gouldner himself admits that the relations between Marxism and academic sociology have not been as 'greatly insulated' from each other as he elsewhere claims (Gouldner, 1970: 111). For example, Gouldner makes the common point that classical sociology worked very much in response to the ideas of Marxism (Gouldner, 1970: 116), rather than ignoring them as we might expect from Gouldner's broader thesis. A good example of this influence is in the work of Tönnies, whose approach was rooted in an appreciation of Marx's theories as much as those of Durkheim, Weber and the other classical sociologists.

In more recent times, there has been strong Marxist influence upon work such as that stemming from the Frankfurt School, in French philosophical work such as Sartre's existentialism, and in Althusser's structuralism. Gouldner is clearly aware of these traditions (1970: 450-1), and yet they act as further disconfirming instances of his thesis about the institutional split of Marxism and academic sociology, in that these schools exist in countries which should be the bastions of academic sociology.

This last observation also problematises Gouldner's association of the crisis of Marxism with Soviet Marxism. As Tom Bottomore points out, later developments within Marxism largely stemmed from countries such as France and Italy, and consequently Gouldner is wrong to imply that it is only the social forces within the

Soviet Union that have had a bearing upon the state of Marxism<sup>2</sup> (Bottomore, 1975: 46)

Unfortunately then, although Gouldner treats detailed sociological analysis with considerable subtlety, his argument about the split of academic sociology and Marxism is not completely convincing. It strikes me that there are three possible reasons why Gouldner may have overstated the divisions within sociology. Firstly, on a methodological level, Gouldner's analysis is based upon the paradigmatic logic that was critiqued in Chapter One. That is to say, he views traditions of social thought monolithically, as if they have distinct, endogenous developmental patterns, and have operated independently of one another. As a result, Gouldner confuses his clearly delineated analytical categories (Marxism, academic sociology) with the rather more messy reality, even when his own substantive analysis questions this elision.

Secondly, separating Marxism and academic sociology adds an attractive narrative coherence to Gouldner's analysis. Interestingly enough however, the real climax of Gouldner's tale is not the reintegration of these sociological paradigms, but the possibility of developing a reflexive sociology. This new possibility certainly arises from Gouldner's analysis of the relations of sociological practitioners to their respective governments, but it is not really the conclusion that the teleology of Gouldner's earlier argument suggests.

A third reason why Gouldner's analysis looks implausible by today's standards is the changing sociological context from 1970 to 1995. Writing in the United States of America in 1970, the dichotomy between Marxism and academic sociology may have seemed more distinct because of the strong political objection to Marxism (Communism) that was particularly prevalent in America. Furthermore the resurgence of the Marxist tradition as a strong ideological opponent of other sociological approaches can only have emphasised the distinction.

However, although Marxism boomed in the 1970s, it is currently largely unsubscribed<sup>3</sup>. Noting this point, it seems plausible to suggest that as the political force of Marxism has decreased, the differences between Marxism and academic sociology have become less politically charged. With the political relevance of this distinction currently at a low ebb, the differences between Marxism and academic sociology seem to be less marked.

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a better way to put this is to point out that because Marxism was for the most part a dead tradition in the Soviet Union, events within Soviet society had a more elliptical effect upon the tradition than those suggested by Gouldner. That is to say, whilst the collapse of Soviet communism may have strongly contributed to the current decline of Marxism, the internal pressures upon Soviet Marxism from within the USSR bore little relation to the live tradition of Marxism as a social theory.

<sup>3</sup> There are still unabashed Marxist theorists around of course. Furthermore, Marxism may not be dead, but only sleeping, waiting to be awoken once again to provide insights into new social contexts, or to find a productive synthesis with another tradition.

Having critiqued Gouldner's account of the history of sociology, it is worth considering his prescription for sociology's future, reflexive sociology. It is certainly an edifying model of sociological praxis, in which truly committed practitioners expand sociology's insights into the substance of their own lives. However, Gouldner's suggestions have not remained unchallenged by other theorists.

The first line of criticism against Gouldner's perspective is that his approach is too totalising. This applies firstly to his analysis of sociology's links to the state. Richard Peterson argues that Gouldner's opposition to 'the system' and its influence upon sociology reifies this struggle into a complete opposition between the two sides. In doing this, Gouldner fails to see the complexity of relations between sociology and the state, looking for a large pitched battle rather than assessing the small struggles that characterise such relations (Peterson, 1971: 328). This is a criticism somewhat reminiscent of postmodernist attacks on theoretical totalities, and it certainly carries some weight. Nevertheless, Gouldner's approach, while glossing over the subtleties, does powerfully remind us of the often pernicious influence that government demands can exercise upon disciplines such as sociology.

The other totalising aspect of Gouldner's analysis is his conception of the reflexive sociologist. As Guy Swanson points out, the idea of dutiful practitioners who transform their lives in the pursuit of knowledge seems to be not merely a goal for the sociologist, but a model for humanity more generally (Swanson, 1971: 320). Thus Gouldner appears to be searching for 'an integration of human existence' rather than a new approach to sociology (Swanson, 1971: 321). Reaching towards such praxis is a worthy goal, but it is also an extremely utopian one that could better serve as an ideal, rather than a strictly attainable goal for sociologists.

Another criticism that relates to Gouldner's goal of praxis, is its potential to be individualistic, or as Peterson puts it, 'quixotic' (Peterson, 1971: 326). After all, it focuses upon sociologists fighting their own little battles, and attempting to transform themselves, rather than organising collective action. One cannot help but see Gouldner's individualistic, strong-willed personality as the basis of such an approach. However, whereas his passionate commitment might allow him to carry personal transformation without losing sight of larger social issues, it is not clear that all sociologists will be able to do so. As Tom Bottomore puts it, there is the possibility that sociologists will become 'narcissitically' concerned with their own personal troubles, and thus divert attention from public issues (Bottomore, 1975: 52). While agreeing with Bottomore's concerns, it seems plausible that sociologists can strike a balance between self-analysis, and the analysis of society more generally. After all, in Gouldner's approach it is self-analysis that leads sociologists to see the

limits of their relationship with the state, and to treat other human beings as they would treat themselves. Consequently, the spectre of a sociologist 'contemplating his [sic] own navel' (Bottomore, 1975: 44) does not necessarily spell the end of a critical sociology.

Perhaps a more telling criticism of Gouldner's approach is the difficulty of justifying one's political goals when operating as a reflexive sociologist. Gouldner implies that a reflexive standpoint will necessarily lead a sociologist to a critical, left-wing approach. This is surely not the case however. Peterson argues that reflexivity does not guarantee radical politics, and suggests that it is just as plausible to operate with a 'capitalist praxis' based upon Parsonianism as it is to base one's approach in more critical sociologies (Peterson, 1971: 327). The problem here is that the reflexive awareness of the theorist must still operate within definite theoretical categories, and, whereas Gouldner treats the radical nature of these as a foregone conclusion, it is clear that different theoretical and political perspectives will construct the society in which they operate in different ways. Therefore, it does not seem legitimate for Gouldner to rule out possibilities such as liberal sociology purely on the grounds of reflexivity and praxis. As we shall see in Chapter Four, Ann Game critiques attempts such as these to use reflexivity as a guarantee of politics and knowledge.

Gouldner's work crystallises the issues upon which this thesis is based, that is the exhaustion of the central traditions of sociology, and the opening up of new possibilities for sociological identity. Furthermore, his alternative conception of sociology as reflexive praxis is a challenging one, that pre-dates important recent developments in sociology by over a decade. However, it is not without its difficulties, including its utopian goal of the transformation of humanity, and the difficulty of guaranteeing critical politics based upon a reflexive approach. I turn now to the fate of Marxism, one of the traditions that Gouldner felt was in a state of crisis.

### *Therborn and the Science of Marxism*

Göran Therborn's work *Science, Class and Society*, published in 1976, exemplifies the popularity of structural Marxism during the 1970s, and takes its lead from the theories of Louis Althusser. It is relevant to this thesis because of its argument that sociology should be superseded by Marxism as the science of society. It also raises interesting questions of theoretical succession, and I shall be considering why structural Marxism became a central focus of sociological analysis in the 1970s rather than conflict theory, the immediate sociological successor to

functionalism. But before addressing these matters, we must consider the basis of Therborn's approach.

Therborn locates his enterprise within the 'contemporary crisis of the social disciplines' which he ascribes to recent social developments in the Western world such as the anti-war movement, the student movement, and the women's movement (Therborn, 1976: 12). These movements challenge the truth of the 'systematic knowledge' produced by the social sciences, and the relationship of the social scientific disciplines to 'social classes and institutions' (1976: 12). His analysis is accordingly located in this 'conjuncture of growth, contradiction and crisis' (1976: 12).

The purpose of Therborn's manifesto is to demonstrate the way forward for the social sciences. He intends to do this by performing a critical analysis of different social scientific discourses, primarily comparing the scientificity of sociology and Marxism<sup>4</sup> (Therborn, 1976: 11-12). Therborn feels that by analysing these discourses within a Marxist framework, he can produce a more adequate basis for future social science than those sociological works that have performed a similar task, such as Robert Friedrichs' *A Sociology of Sociology* (1970), and Gouldner's *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (Therborn, 1976: 31). The difference is that Therborn's analysis focuses on economic and political struggles whereas sociological writers emphasise 'questions of culture and morality' (1976: 31-2).

In performing a Marxist analysis, Therborn intends to substantiate the Althusserian claim that the Marxist theory of society is a science among other sciences (Therborn, 1976: 55). Therborn's aim is thus to demonstrate that Marxism and sociology are discrete sciences with different objects. He discusses the status of science at some length, but for the purposes of this thesis, there are three important aspects to his approach.

Firstly, a science must have a particular object, an object that cannot be taken as given (1976: 40). This argument points to the conventionalism of structural Marxism, in that science is conceptualised as producing and constantly transforming its object, rather than merely discovering it (1976: 60). Therborn's approach here is derived from the 'Anti-empiricist thesis' central to Althusserian Marxism (1976: 60), in which knowledge is not considered to be a 'receptacle' that contains the 'imprints' of the objects of knowledge, but rather is a productive process that transforms its subject matter through its operation (Benton, 1984: 38).

Secondly, science is a distinct form of knowledge from ideology. Whereas science is open with respect to the questions it poses, and does not prejudge the answers,

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<sup>4</sup> Therborn also briefly examines the status of economics, but that is of little relevance to this thesis.

ideology asks questions whose solutions are 'pre-ordained' to reflect the interests of the 'ideological subject' rather than being cognitively motivated (1976: 60).

Finally, to be scientific a discourse must identify generalised patterns of determination rather than unique events<sup>5</sup> (1976: 70-2). Although committed to this conception, structural Marxism breaks away from the 'mechanical reductionism' of crude Marxist theory in which theoretical, political and ideological struggles are determined by the economic base (1976: 52). Instead, although the political and ideological levels are linked to, or restricted by, the mode of production, they are also seen as possessing 'a certain autonomy' not reducible to purely economic considerations (1976: 75). Consequently, determinations are not simply monocausal, stemming from the economic base, but structural, stemming from the conjunction of forces upon the different levels (political, ideological, economic) of society (Benton, 1984: 63). With these distinctions made clear, Therborn goes on to consider the history of sociology and Marxism.

For Therborn, sociology can be best situated by considering it in relation to politics and economics between two social revolutions (Therborn, 1976: 143). More particularly, early sociology 'emerged as a discourse on politics after the bourgeois revolution' and evolved into its mature stage as 'a discourse on economics before the threat of a proletarian revolution' (1976: 417). He argues that the main achievement of the first sociologists was to widen the study of politics from a study of rulers to a study of a number of determining social characteristics and cultural patterns (1976: 210). This new discourse was shaped by the work of Saint-Simon, Comte and Tocqueville as a response to new conditions after the bourgeois revolutions. These conditions included the demotion of the power of the aristocracy from its pivotal status in earlier political thought, the undermining of social thought based on constitutional agreement, and the consolidation of the bourgeoisie as the major post-revolutionary force (1976: 211). Therborn suggests that as a result of these changes politics came to be viewed as determined by societal forces, and the method of study that developed was that of 'positive natural science' (1976: 215).

On the other hand, mature classical sociology can be characterised as a response to the epistemological and practical beliefs of the liberal economists in the 19th century (Therborn, 1976: 226-7). The most productive aspect of this response was, according to Therborn, the identification of 'ideological community', that is the influence that a 'community of values and norms' has upon human behaviour (1976: 224). In the case of Durkheim's work, this involves looking wider than the

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<sup>5</sup> Therborn does consider the possibility that a discourse may also be considered scientific if it is taxonomic in its intentions (1976: 70). However, he argues that none of the social sciences have taxonomy as a central concern, and as such, this cannot be considered to be the main aim of social science (1976: 70).

utilitarian characterisation of humans as pleasure maximisers, and instead examining the impact that shared experiences and representations make upon human existence (1976: 258-9). Weber's key contribution in this area was to analyse the rise of capitalism in terms of the 'spirit' and 'ideological preconditions' necessary for its establishment (1976: 309).

Whatever their achievements, Therborn has strict reservations about the contributions of the classical sociologists. Although he admires the critical element of their work, Therborn argues that they were ultimately conservative. He suggests that Weber and Durkheim may have critiqued the 'European experience of capitalism' but 'were fundamentally loyal to this experience' (1976: 317). Unlike Marxist thinkers, the classical sociologists 'remained within the capitalist cage' (1976: 315).

Moving on to the history of Marxism, Therborn argues that Marxist discourse can be situated in relation to three main influences. The first of these was the social conditions in Germany that produced 'radicalized intelligentsia' who were politically opposed to those in power at the time (1976: 317). The second was the grounding of these intellectuals in a 'systematic theoretical discourse on society', having been educated in Hegelian philosophy (1976: 18). The most important influence however, was the union of the radicalized intellectuals and the workers' movement (1976: 324).

For Therborn, the key to Marxism's historical importance is the fact that Marxist intellectuals were articulated to, and learned from, the working class. He maintains that by opening themselves to the proletariat, Marx and Engels learned two things. Firstly, they came to see that the social world exists in 'concrete materiality' and not just in abstract philosophy (1976: 328). Secondly, they discovered the importance of class *struggle*, which differentiated their perspective from those who saw the proletariat solely in terms of their role as the most subordinated class. Instead, Marx and Engels saw that the proletariat not only suffered the most, but were also a revolutionary force for change (1976: 328). As a result of this understanding, Marx and Engels could subordinate themselves to serving this class by clarifying the history and nature of class antagonisms (1976: 333).

It is this active link with a revolutionary social force that Therborn argues differentiates Marxism and sociology. Both the founders of Marxism and its significant later contributors like Lenin were important members of 'militant' labour movements (Therborn, 1976: 335). However, there has not, according to Therborn, been a 'single prominent sociologist in the capitalist world' whose ideas have been formed this way (1976: 335). For Therborn, the advantages of this praxis reach not just into the formation of ideas but into action as well. As he argues elsewhere, whilst both Weber and Lenin concerned themselves with the relations between

capitalism and imperialism, Weber wrote a 'treatise of sociology' and Lenin 'became the organizer of a revolution' (1976: 271).

Therborn's analysis concludes with the contention that both sociology and Marxism were primarily concerned with analysing the influence of the capitalist market economy upon other aspects of society, including analysing the problems that this economic system generated. On the one hand, sociology operated within the polarization by which self-interest became the realm of economics and social context (ideological community) the role of sociology (1976: 420). On the other hand, Marxism broke with this problematic and situated both the market and the ideological community in the wider social totality, the mode of production (1976: 429).

Therborn also argues that Marxism and sociology are separate sciences, each with a 'specific object' and a 'pattern of social determination' (1976: 424). However, although Therborn grants sociology 'scientific' status (1976: 424), he argues that Marxism is the superior form of knowledge production. Furthermore, Therborn believes that a Marxist critique of sociology is in order. This critique would involve anchoring ideological communities in the social totality, which includes the forces and relations of production, the class struggle, and the state (1976: 429). To do this, Marxism must demonstrate how sociology's ideological communities are structured by the class struggle in terms of the 'contradictory unities of the values and norms of opposing classes' (1976: 429). When seen in these ways, ideological communities become explicable in terms of the Marxist pattern of social determination. Therborn suggests that if this critique is performed, sociology will be transcended and Marxism will be not just one social science among others but '*the science of society*' (1976: 429).

### *The Revenge of Marxism: An Assessment*

At this point I would like to consider a number of different aspects of Therborn's manifesto, and consider whether it successfully ensures the revenge of Marxism against those who had marginalised it or pronounced it dead.

One interesting and crucial feature of Therborn's work, and structural Marxism more generally, is the fundamental insistence that Marxism is entirely distinct from other forms of social analysis. This is bound up with another aspect of structural Marxist analysis - the attempt to locate the *true* version of Marxism. The first type of move is clearly evident in Therborn's claim that the sciences of economics, Marxism and sociology are characterised by their 'mutual distinctiveness' and that attempts at synthesis are futile, rendering 'theoretical promiscuity sterile' (Therborn, 1976: 427). From this perspective, theoretical traditions are different species, amongst which there can be no productive relationship. The other structural Marxist manoeuvre is

evident in Therborn's attempt to achieve the 'liberation of Marx' from philosophical and ideological interpretations (1976: 427). By doing so, he hopes to retain Marxism's revolutionary potential, and reject other interpretations of Marx such as Sartre's humanist Marxism (1976: 53).

It is not overstating the forcefulness of these positions to suggest, as Craib does, that there is an 'air of biblical exegesis' about these structural Marxist contentions (Craib, 1984: 128). This can plausibly be explained by the complex situation facing theorists such as Althusser. One of his primary goals was to remove the influence of Stalin from Marxism, and yet he was unsatisfied with the existing alternatives to Stalinism, which offered humanist interpretations of Marxism (Benton, 1984: 15). These humanist philosophies were unpalatable to Althusser in that they were voluntaristic, and were open to 'opportunism' and indeterminacy (Benton, 1984: 16). Consequently, structural Marxism developed an account of Marxist theory that claimed to be *the* true interpretation, a move intended to vanquish both Stalin's 'deviation' (Craib, 1984: 153) and the non-scientific alternatives. The result was intended to be a deterministic (but non-empiricist) science of society in which humanism was exorcised, but impeccable radical left-wing credentials were retained.

This goes some way to *explaining* the emphasis of structural Marxism upon its own uniqueness and its special relationship with Marx's writings. However, it is another question as to how *defensible* this position is. Although structural Marxism's emphasis upon its purity reflected the fervour of a politically radical theory that was in the ascendant, the goal of purifying Marxism from other influences seems to be an impossible one. As I argued in Chapter One, traditions of thought are necessarily porous, and develop in response to other traditions. Consequently, Therborn's claim that the structure of Marxism is in principle not amenable to revisions and syntheses seems implausible. Instead, his argument appears to be another case of paradigmatic logic, in which theories are considered to be qualitatively different from one another, leading to a picture of history in which traditions of thought stand apart in splendid isolation.

It is worth noting that the advantages of isolating Marxism from other traditions are questionable. After all, the synthesis of Marxism and other intellectual traditions may well have been precisely what has kept the Marxist tradition alive. In fact, Therborn's own version of Marxism seems to be a synthesis of two separable theoretical strands, that is the Hegelianised (dialectical) Marxism of Lukács (1971) and the scientific Marxism of *Capital* (1962). Furthermore, the theoretical movement of which Therborn is a part, structural Marxism, was inspired not just by Marxism but by French structuralism, although this influence was often unacknowledged (Benton, 1984: 14-5). This can be seen in the passages of *Science, Class and*

*Society* where Therborn characterises society in relation to a number of structural forces at play, including the claim that superstructural elements may be 'relatively autonomous' (eg. Therborn, 1976: 410). One might conclude from this that structural Marxism existed in a state of denial, a denial fuelled by the particular exigencies of its formation.

A further interesting feature of the work of Althusserian Marxists such as Therborn is its contradictory impulse between conventionalism and objectivity. As we have seen, the structural Marxist conception of science has a strongly conventionalist aspect. The central plank of this argument is that knowledge is a social product - sciences *produce* the objects that they study, rather than discovering them. As a consequence of this, 'no external proof of the truth of a science can be given', in that the verification of propositions is a process occurring within scientific practice, rather than reaching outside it to the real (Therborn, 1976: 60). From this position, it is easy to understand Therborn's argument that different approaches such as economics, sociology, and Marxism can all be considered sciences. That is to say, each approach produces its own object world, and operates consistently in this world, searching for patterns of determination within it.

The problem with this approach occurs when Marxists such as Therborn wish to demonstrate the superiority of their analysis over other perspectives such as that of sociology. We have seen that Therborn believes this to be the case, firstly in his argument that a Marxist analysis of theoretical discourse is better than a sociological approach, and, secondly, in his general claim that Marxism can supersede sociology as the science of society. The question remains, however, as to how one could demonstrate that Marxism is the superior approach. After all, if the practices of a science operate purely in a world of its own construction, and do not reach out into the external world, how can one claim that any particular science more accurately captures the social world than any other?

This is a difficulty that is often noted with respect to Althusser's distinction between science and ideology. The difficulty is bridging the gap between the internally constructed world of the cognitive and an external world that has been defined, by theoretical fiat, as empirically unavailable. If this gap cannot be bridged, then the grounds for arguing that knowledges are qualitatively different (i.e. verified or unverified) are removed.

Stephen Crook notes that Althusser calls on his Spinozist inclinations in an attempt to solve this problem. Althusser's solution is to argue that the privileged knowledge (science) is special because its structure is homologous with that of the 'real object', that is, the external world (Crook, 1991: 141). Unfortunately, in Spinoza's model this homology is guaranteed only through the metaphysical claim that 'the

spontaneous unity of thought and extension' is produced through their being a part of God (Crook, 1991: 144-5).

Consequently, structural Marxism seems to occupy an untenable position. On the one hand, the routes it has to justify its claims to scientificity are either extremely metaphysical, and thus 'unscientific', or take it back in the direction of empirical verification, a method that has been openly forsworn. On the other hand, by giving up the distinction between true and false knowledge, structural Marxists must admit that their approach is only one among many, none of which has decisively greater validity or insight into the world than any other. If the latter is conceded, then claims such as Therborn's, that Marxism is superior to sociology must be seriously reconsidered.

A third point of interest about Therborn's work is his view of Marxism as praxis, and how this relates to the relevance of the new social movements. Therborn argues that the formation of Marxism was crucially influenced by its interaction with a radical social group, the working class movement. He also suggests that the praxis of Marxist theorists such as the Bolsheviks is the decisive difference between Marxist and sociological thought. Having taken this standpoint, it seems that the emergence of new, radicalised social movements might have provided a new basis for theoretical development and praxis. However, this is a possibility that Therborn ignores, preferring to emphasise the influence of praxis in the safe-haven of the past.

This lack of theoretical interest in the new social movements distinguishes Therborn's work from that of recent pragmatist/post-structuralist authors such as Steven Seidman, who argue that the important new questions raised by such movements demand a re-orientation of sociology (Seidman, 1994a: 2-5). The clearest example of this renewed praxis is the feminist movement and its articulation of social demands with sociological theory<sup>6</sup>.

The final issue that I would like to raise with respect to Therborn's work is the question of theoretical succession. In particular, the problem is why structural Marxism became the focus of so much interest and attention in the 1970s instead of conflict theory, the sociological successor to functionalism.

'Conflict theory' is the name that is usually given to a series of somewhat diverse reactions to structural-functionalism, reactions that were united in their claim that Parsonian-style theory understated the importance of social conflict. This problem with functionalism was considered to stem from its overemphasis upon social order, the systematicity of societies, and the integrative power of social norms. A number of different authors are associated with this position including Coser, Lockwood,

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of a feminist standpoint which argues for the privileged status of feminist knowledge due to the social position of women, is sometimes explicitly derived from the Marxist position in works such as Lukács' *The History of Class Consciousness* (see for example Jaggar, 1983).

Dahrendorf and Rex, and they range from seeing conflict as (paradoxically, perhaps) contributing to functional integration (Coser, eg. 1964: 205-9), to viewing conflict as an unavoidable part of societies that constantly disrupts their smooth-running (Dahrendorf, eg. 1964: 209-225).

I would argue that there are three basic reasons why conflict theory never seized the sociological imagination in the same way that structural Marxism did. The first of these relates to the political climate of the late 1960s and 1970s. As Gouldner argues, once left-wing politics were in vogue, structural-functionalism was reviled in many quarters as an untenably conservative and reactionary approach to social analysis. Although conflict theory moved to correct the conservative bias of functionalism, it existed as a movement spawned from functionalism, whose writers, for the most part, did not entertain political radicalism (although Rex's position comes close to this<sup>7</sup>). On the other hand, structural Marxism called upon a tradition of thought whose radicalism was unquestionable, and which existed outside of the parameters of the American liberal establishment. In the left-wing intellectual environment of the time, it is not surprising that Marxism seemed a more attractive alternative than conflict theory, which was born politically compromised.

The second reason why conflict theory lacked the appeal of structural Marxism relates to the explanatory power and clarity of their respective analyses. As Craib argues in relation to Dahrendorf's work, the main thrust of his argument is that social divisions such as role structures may produce conflict as well as consensus, and that we should pay attention to both of these situations (Craib, 1984: 62). As such, conflict theorists like Dahrendorf do not actually offer much of an explanatory account of social phenomena, settling primarily for directing attention towards the complexity of social life (Craib, 1984: 68). Furthermore, these theorists often seem to have inherited the functionalist tendency of describing every-day events in jargon, as if this heightens the power of their analyses.

On the other hand, structural Marxism offered 'scientific' analyses that make determinate claims about the social world, and deploy theoretical concepts such as 'mode of production' to explain the relative importance of the economic, political and ideological levels in different social formations. Consequently it seemed to offer a powerful and rigorous analytical tool in a way that conflict theory did not. Whilst it can, in my view, be maintained that this 'rigorous' attitude projects a questionable masculinist ideology of science, this should not hide the fact that structural Marxism did provide a much more systematic analytical approach than that of conflict theory. It is important to note then, that although I have criticised the closures and omissions

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<sup>7</sup> The work of writers such as Rex (1960), whose approach is close to both Marxism and conflict theory, should remind us once again that there are no clear boundaries between theoretical traditions.

that characterise structural Marxism, these closures, by focusing attention on a small number of factors, also enhance its ability to explain phenomena in a rigorous and coherent fashion. This highlights the productive aspect of theoretical closure, as against its exclusionary effect.

Ironically, as time has progressed, the explanatory power of theories has probably come to be seen as less important, or even accorded negative worth, on the grounds that the most strenuous explanations are reductionist, and thus make untenable truth claims. Consequently, as Craib points out, the recent popularity of Foucauldian analysis could be seen as, to an extent, re-instating the explanatory vagueness and complex descriptivism of conflict theory (Craib, 1984: 158), albeit packaged in a highly theoretical, 'radical' fashion.

The final reason why conflict theory did not succeed functionalism as a dominant approach to social theory consists of a combination of these two arguments. In essence the point is that conflict theory is not really a theoretical approach at all, but rather a 'fragment' of structural functionalism (Craib, 1984: 64). As we saw above, although a conflict theorist such as Dahrendorf at times insists that conflict is an endemic feature of society, his final conclusion is that a conflict model by itself is not adequate:

As far as I can see, we need for the explanation of sociological problems both the equilibrium and the conflict models of society; and it may well be that, in a philosophical sense, society has two faces of equal reality: one of stability, harmony, and consensus and one of change, conflict, and constraint (Dahrendorf, 1964: 225).

The oddity of this idea is readily apparent - how can one hope to understand society by drawing eclectically on two opposed models? (Holmwood & Stewart, 1991: 119). Craib suggests a more plausible way of understanding this situation, arguing that the conflict model can be understood primarily as drawing attention to actual, empirical conflict (Craib, 1984: 63-4). However, whereas conflicts can actually be explained in the functionalist approach by re-systemising them (for example, seeing them as the result of evolutionary developments), conflict theory has no wider picture of its own in which to insert these occurrences (Craib, 1984: 63-4). That is to say, the mechanisms offered by conflict theorists to explain disharmony (such as the divisive effect of role structures) actually presume the operation of a functionalist-like system in the first place. Consequently, conflict theory's explanatory force derives from functionalism: its accounts only make sense with reference to the larger, functionalist model. It seems likely then, that conflict theory could never have been a clear successor to functionalism, in that it leaned too heavily upon its theoretically discredited predecessor. In those theories where this was not so, such as Rex's, the

conflicts in question were essentially class conflicts, in which case the theory points 'onwards' to Marxism.

*Summary: The Tensions Within Structural Marxism*

In this part of the chapter, I have been considering whether writers such as Therborn managed to capitalise upon the identity crisis of sociology and ensure the hegemony of Marxism in its newest form - structural Marxism. I have argued that there are three important problems with such an approach. Firstly, for particular historical and political reasons, structural Marxists such as Therborn attempt to isolate one particular type of Marxism as the 'true' Marxism, and to suggest that this approach is structurally incompatible with other approaches to social analysis. Once again, this is a case of theorists employing a 'paradigmatic' understanding of theories, and I have suggested that this misrepresents matters in important ways, denying the importance of the theoretical intertwining of traditions, and disguising the fact that structural Marxism is itself a hybrid approach.

Secondly, I have argued that there is an important tension within structural Marxism between conventionalism and objectivism. This tension is manifested in Therborn's work in his desire to argue that sociology and economics are parallel sciences to Marxism (conventionalism), and his insistence that Marxism provides a better approach to social analysis than the alternatives (objectivism).

Thirdly, I noted an inconsistency in Therborn's approach to praxis. He argues that Marxism achieved its special status by articulating itself with a radical social group, the working class. However, Therborn ignores the possibility that the new social movements could produce new forms of praxis, an unfortunate omission on his part.

Finally, I discussed a case of theoretical succession and offered some arguments as to why structural Marxism became dominant in a way that conflict theory did not. I argued that politically speaking, conflict theory was linked too strongly to functionalism, and that Marxism provided a radical alternative from outside the bounds of American liberal academia. I also suggested that structural Marxism provided a superior explanatory approach to conflict theory, even if this was sometimes disguised by pseudo-scientific jargon. However, I noted that this very explanatory power became a liability in the newly developing theoretical climate of postmodernism. The last argument that I gave about conflict theory was that it was theoretically parasitic upon the functionalist framework, suggesting that it could never be a distinctive successor to functionalism. It is this type of argument that suggests that a rehabilitated functionalism with a careful theoretical basis, might capitalise on the advantages of conflict theory and provide once again a useful basis for social analysis. It is such a position that Alexander offers in his manifesto for sociology.

### *Alexander and The Revaluation of Theory*

Between 1982 and 1984 Jeffrey Alexander released a four volume opus entitled *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* that assesses the work of some of the leading figures of the sociological tradition. It is of interest to this thesis because Alexander hoped to move beyond the sociological crisis of identity by offering a new theoretical basis for sociology. In particular, Alexander's approach involves a revaluation of Parsons' work, and as such, contributes to a neofunctionalist revival. I shall be arguing that Alexander's manifesto, like Therborn's, contains interesting tensions between pluralist conventionalism and a commitment to scientific rigour. I shall also question the vision of basing a rehabilitation of sociology on a clarification of technical, analytical issues.

Alexander introduces *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* with the rhetorical claim that, at the present time, 'If sociology could speak it would say, "I am tired"' (Alexander, 1982a: xiii). To his mind, sociology has not really advanced since the decline of Parsons, and Alexander believes that the criticisms of Parsons which set the stage for sociology in the 1970s did not advance the sociological endeavour, instead leaving it 'moribund' (Alexander, 1982a: xiii-xiv). Alexander hopes to rejuvenate sociology and save it from 'the onset of senility' (1982a: xiii-xiv).

The way in which Alexander intends to revive sociology is by revitalising sociological theory (Alexander, 1982a: xv-xvi). In particular, he is attempting to establish a new 'theoretical logic' that can provide the basis for a post-positivist sociology (1982a: xv). This, Alexander hopes, will combat the rise of the 'technocratic fetishism of empirical sociology', a force that he believes has become hegemonic (1982a: xiv). The first volume of Alexander's work outlines his general theoretical position, whilst the others analyse and critique the work of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Parsons in order to develop the new theoretical logic that Alexander has outlined. We shall consider, first, his general scientific and sociological framework.

Alexander characterises his approach to science as 'multi-dimensional' (1982a: 66). On this conception of scientific activity, practice is seen as occurring within a hierarchy of interrelated but relatively autonomous levels (1982a: 2-3). These levels range from the most generalized or metaphysical concerns which consist of general presuppositions, models and concepts, to the most empirical foci which include correlations, methodological assumptions and observations (1982a: 3). The central point of viewing scientific activity on this continuum is to emphasise the way in which none of these levels is reducible to the other. Alexander uses this point to argue that scientific activity necessarily includes generalizing or metaphysical thought

that cannot simply be deduced or derived from the empirical, instead having a certain independence from empirical issues.

Furthermore, Alexander hopes to show that generalized thought consists in itself of a number of irreducible levels, which in the case of sociology are assumptions about the nature of action and order, political and ideological orientations, and the models of social activity chosen (1982a: 40). To illustrate the important differences between these levels, Alexander argues for the relative autonomy of ideological, methodological and systems-theoretical debate. For instance, Alexander suggests that choosing a functionalist model of society (a generalized choice at the systems level) does not necessarily imply a 'commitment to a conservative ideological position'<sup>8</sup> (1982a: 58). To make this claim, Alexander points out that there are both radical Marxist thinkers and conservative Parsonians who use the functionalist model of society as a system (1982a: 60-1). Consequently, to conflate a broadly functionalist approach with one particular ideological position is untenable.

The final point that Alexander wants to make in relation to the scientific continuum is that for sociology, presuppositions about the rationality of action and the nature of order are the most important generalised commitments (1982a: 65). These two suppositions 'establish the general framework that cannot be subsumed under other kinds of assumptions' (1982a: 65). Further than that, these choices 'manifest properties that decisively affect sociological thought at every level of the intellectual continuum' (1982a: 65).

Alexander's approach to action and order has two central facets. Firstly, he stresses the advantages of seeing these problems in the most general light possible, and he argues that much confusion has been wrought by theorists who have reduced these problems to more specific concerns (Alexander, 1982a: 82, 90). Secondly, he emphasises once again the importance of a 'multi-dimensional' approach, this time to the problem of action, insisting that action be seen not just as instrumental *or* oriented to substantive norms, but as a combination of both (1982a: 66).

In summary, these contentions are intended to establish the conditions for a 'post-positivist universalism' (1982a: 123). This involves evaluating theory in terms of its 'expansive and synthetic scope' which encourages theorists to 'extend common ground rather than diminish it' (1982a: 120-1). Alexander's generalising ambition is also firmly articulated with his emphasis on multi-dimensionality which stresses the way in which distinct general questions must not be reduced to each other, or more

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, one of the practitioners that Alexander accuses of this reduction is Gouldner. It is clearly the case that in his criticism of Parsons, Gouldner overstates the inherent conservatism of functionalism. However, Gouldner also admits that depending on the social context, a theoretical approach may be conservative, liberal or radical. As such, Gouldner argues that whilst functionalism in America is conservative, in the Soviet Union it is a liberalising force.

particular issues. The other volumes of Alexander's work critique classical figures with respect to this standard of multi-dimensionality.

Volumes two to four of Alexander's *Theoretical Logic* are lengthy expositions of the work of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Parsons. They are guided by an assessment of the increasing ability of these authors to create multidimensional analyses that synthesize the instrumental and normative aspects of social life. In the second volume, entitled *The Antinomies of Classical Thought: Marx and Durkheim*, Alexander discusses in detail the work of Marx and Durkheim, but his main conclusion is simple: the problems and limitations of their theories are caused by a failure to achieve multidimensionality (Alexander, 1982b: 7).

He argues that in the early stages of their careers both Marx and Durkheim shifted from emphasising the independent status of norms to an interest in the materiality of life. Marx continued to develop this materialist path and contended that under capitalism, life praxis was no longer related to meanings and emotions but was instead determined by the capitalist system. On the other hand, Durkheim's later work constituted a rejection of his earlier materialist leanings and returned to emphasising the importance of meaning and intention in the behaviour of actors. Whilst Alexander views this as a breakthrough that reasserts the possibility of voluntarism, he also suggests that Durkheim over-emphasised this aspect of social life. This led Durkheim to ignore the objective, external conditions of action, or, as in the case of economic restraints, to attempt to reduce them to moral questions (Alexander, 1982b: 294).

From these arguments Alexander concludes that in their mature work Marx and Durkheim each present 'an extraordinarily one-sided portrait of social order and the action which informs it' (Alexander, 1982b: 299). On the one hand, Marx emphasises the instrumental nature of action and the way in which social order is enforced through the laws of capitalism (Alexander, 1982b: 171). On the other hand, for Durkheim, action is voluntaristic and subjectively oriented, and order is symbolic, maintained through collective sentiments (Alexander, 1982b: 250). The result of this one-sidedness is, according to Alexander, the use of *ad hoc* explanations for phenomena which cannot be fitted into the categories of the already existing framework (1982b: 300). This closure is also manifested in the development of the theoretical schools derived from the work of Marx and Durkheim. Alexander argues that the members of these schools covertly revise the work of the founding theorist in an attempt to make it more multidimensional (1982b: 306).

In the next, somewhat slimmer volume entitled *The Classical Attempt At Theoretical Synthesis: Max Weber*, Alexander examines the work of Weber, whom he argues sometimes achieves the level of synthesis that Marx and Durkheim do not.

Investigating Weber's presuppositions using the standard of multidimensionality, Alexander argues that Weber's early work has elements of both idealism and instrumentalism, but is 'combinatorial' rather than synthetic (Alexander, 1983: 19). However, parts of Weber's later work transcend this and he produced the

first truly synthetic strand of sociological theory, a multidimensional analysis in which he is fundamentally reconstructing idealist and materialist theory (Alexander, 1983: 23).

Alexander argues that this transformation was effected when Weber explained action not in concrete terms, but as 'a product of different analytical orders' (Alexander, 1983: 33). This means that Weber doesn't view actions as instantiations of *either* instrumental *or* ideal motivations but rather sees both conditions as part of the 'environment of every act' (Alexander, 1983: 56). For Alexander, the best instantiation of this synthetic approach is Weber's revision of the notion of social class, that had previously been defined in instrumental terms.

However, Weber did not always achieve this synthetic approach in his later work. Alexander argues that much of Weber's analysis of China's class and political structures is instrumentally reductionist (Alexander, 1983: 60-2). Furthermore, Weber's famous essay on bureaucracy gestures towards the importance of the normative aspects of bureaucratic structures but primarily concerns itself with the instrumental factors of domination and enforcement (Alexander, 1983: 60-2).

Alexander's work concludes with a volume entitled *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*, in which he argues that Parsons' work provides the best yet multidimensional analytical framework. Alexander is particularly appreciative of Parsons' work, as he admires his sensitivity to the importance and autonomy of general thinking (Alexander, 1984: 11). Parsons also endears himself to Alexander by explicitly attempting to synthesise poles such as materialism and idealism (Alexander, 1984: 12).

According to Alexander, Parsons achieves multidimensionality in his approaches to social action and order. As an illustration of this, Alexander believes that Parsons accomplishes a multidimensional approach to action in *The Structure of Social Action* (1966 [1937]), with his concept of the 'unit act' that provides an analytical framework for understanding action. The multidimensionality of the 'unit act' idea is realised in the first instance by Parsons' insistence that all action has a normative orientation that is not merely dependent upon the conditions of action (Alexander, 1984: 19). This idealist emphasis is, however, synthetically balanced by the fact that for an actor's normatively defined goals to be reached, they must negotiate the external conditions of their action (Alexander, 1984: 19). In this way Parsons transcends the idealism/materialism polarity.

Alexander argues that it took Parsons considerably longer to create a multi-dimensional approach to order, an achievement made possible by the concept of the 'cybernetic continuum' developed in the 1960s (Alexander, 1984: 29). The advantage of this continuum is that it captures analytically the different influences on social order, from the most instrumental (specific) to the most normative (general). Furthermore, as a general framework, it does not make any claim as to which causes are important in particular 'historical contexts' (Alexander, 1984: 33); rather it lays out the field of possibilities, insisting that an explanation cannot be acceptable if it ignores the determinant influence of any part of the continuum.

No discussion of Parsons' work would be complete without a consideration of his A-G-I-L (interchange) model. Alexander argues that Parsons developed this approach as a corrective to his earlier work on the social system, which was not sufficiently analytical, for instance defining allocation in too concrete a fashion (Alexander, 1984: 75-6). Whereas many theorists have seen the A-G-I-L scheme simply in relation to its underlying functionalism, Alexander prioritises its commitment to multidimensionality and synthesis. By characterising societies in relation to Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration and Pattern Maintenance, the central problems of allocation and integration can be analytically addressed in terms of interchanges between these subsystems of society.

Having established the value of Parsons' approach, Alexander is left with the task of explaining the large number of criticisms to which Parsonianism has been subjected to. Alexander's explanatory strategy is to argue that while Parsons generated an amazingly successful piece of meta-theory that can provide a framework for other work on the scientific continuum, he often misunderstood this achievement. These misunderstandings lead Parsons to deduce the status of more empirical elements from his own general schema, and he thus makes the mistake of conflating analytical success with empirical correctness (Alexander, 1984: 156, 160). In this respect, Alexander argues that critics like Merton correctly criticise Parsons' 'formalism', but fail to acknowledge that general analysis does have an important role in its own sphere (Alexander, 1984: 162).

The same kind of slippage in Parsons' work gives rise to the criticisms of those such as Gouldner who object to the way in which Parsons derives from his analytical focus upon equilibrium, the actual empirical equilibrium of society (Alexander, 1984: 186). However, once again such critics fail to see that the first does not necessarily imply the second, and that Parsons' mistake in this respect does not devalue his general theory (Alexander, 1984: 186). Alexander uses these arguments to demonstrate his contention that Parsons, whilst having developed a successful theoretical framework, often mis-uses it in its application to sociological problems.

In conclusion, Alexander argues that of the four thinkers examined, Parsons lays the surest foundations for the continuation of sociology. His approach to sociological analysis often provides synthetic frameworks that outclass those of the classical thinkers. However, Parsons does not use his theoretical frameworks well, and often attempts to deduce empirical reality from general theory. Consequently, argues Alexander, the task of a successful application of multi-dimensional theory 'must remain its [sociology's] most sought after goal' (Alexander, 1984: 288).

*Assessment: Alexander and the Return to Orthodoxy*

Alexander's work constitutes a sizeable achievement, and demonstrates a tenacious single-mindedness in its attempts to clarify the theoretical basis of sociology. In this section I shall be considering its relation to the crisis situation outlined by Gouldner, particularly as a part of the Parsonian revival. I shall also examine the wider relevance of the pluralism that is central to Alexander's approach. Finally, I shall argue that as an attempt to refound sociology, Alexander's project is misconceived from the start.

One of the striking features of Alexander's approach is its far-reaching attempt to rehabilitate Parsons. This marks a crucial turn-around: the crisis began with the demise of Parsonian structural-functionalism, and the attempt to re-instate this perspective is as surprising a reversal as the Restoration. That is not to say that Alexander is uncritical of Parsons' work, and its empirical misapplications. Nevertheless, his manifesto statement owes an immense debt to Parsonian sociology.

For one thing, Alexander's treatment of sociological history is very similar to that of Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). Thomas Burger argues that Alexander's treatment of materialism relies heavily on Parsons' analysis, except with more explicit reference to Marx (Burger, 1986: 274), and Jem Thomas points out that Alexander's treatment of Weber is 'deeply reminiscent of Parsons' (Thomas, 1985: 489). Consequently, one wonders why such a lengthy replay of Parsons' arguments is necessary.

Secondly, Alexander does not really develop his own frame of analysis in relation to the multi-dimensionality of action and order (Burger, 1986: 289). Instead, he seems satisfied to demonstrate that Parsons' work in fact achieves what Parsons hoped it would - the transcendence of the classical framework into a more tenable general theory. As Burger points out, it would have been more useful for Alexander to further clarify his own arguments about the scientific continuum, as he does not give a detailed explanation or example of what happens at each level as one traverses the spectrum in either direction (Burger, 1986: 287).

Thirdly, even Alexander's conception of science is based upon Parsons' notion of the cybernetic continuum, aping the latter's traversal from generality to specificity. It is quite clear that the impetus behind both of these formulations is the same - to argue that any approach must begin from a general framework in which the elements of the continuum are all necessary analytical parts, and none of which is reducible to any other. Furthermore, it is arguable that Alexander's approach contains the same idealist bias as Parsons' - after all, Alexander emphasises the priority of the generalising side of science over the empirical, in the same way that Parsons has been accused of prioritising the ideal over the material (Burger, 1986: 288).

These points should not stop us from seeing Alexander's valuable contribution. As Alexander himself argues, his task required an 'archaeological reconstruction' in that Parsons' best work is 'cross-cut, at every point' by conflationary analyses (Alexander, 1984: 211). Alexander certainly helps to clarify theoretical issues, and his concept of the scientific continuum, while based in Parsons' work, constitutes a significant development. Nevertheless, one might be justified in feeling that the insights that are Alexander's own might be captured in a single volume, rather than in the leviathan that he in fact offers.

Whatever the originality of Alexander's work, it is hard not to see his approach as laying the theoretical basis for neo-functionalism. Although in *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* he does not pin his colours to the mast, Alexander clearly has sympathies in this direction, as is evident in his editorial input to the *Neofunctionalism* collection (Alexander, 1985). As well as this, by accepting the Parsonian theoretical framework of society as a system that has to deal with needs such as allocation and integration, Alexander is quite obviously committed to the basic analytical foci of functionalism.

The next interesting question about Alexander's work is how he responds to the pluralization of sociology. Clearly, from his comments about the situation during the 1970s, Alexander is unhappy with the proliferation of perspectives that have led to the current state of sociology. However, Alexander's approach seems to mark a movement in the direction of pluralism, in two respects.

The first aspect of this pluralism is Alexander's conventionalist theory of the scientific continuum. By dividing scientific activity into a welter of relatively autonomous levels, Alexander sanctions a wide variety of activity among sociological practitioners. This provides a pluralistic alternative to the monistic insistence that sociology should be primarily concerned with methodology, empirical facts, or middle-range theories.

As well as this, Alexander acknowledges the importance of generalised pre-suppositions within scientific thinking, a move that implicitly opens up the range of

possible approaches. That is to say, basing science in the empirical implies that there is only one solution to any problem. However, by emphasising the importance of general presuppositions, the theorist brings into view the constructive aspect of scientific thought, and makes visible the potential plurality of ways of understanding the world.

Alexander's theory is further pluralized by his emphasis upon the multidimensionality of theory. This 'multidimensional' focus is synthetic, suggesting the importance of including different elements in theory, rather than excluding or reducing elements, a practice which Alexander argues makes theory one-dimensional. One might suggest that Alexander tries to find the best in everything.

These pluralistic strands in Alexander's theory are, however, balanced by other elements of his theory. For one thing, although Alexander is at pains to emphasise the autonomy of the different levels of sociological analysis, he still argues that the presuppositional questions of action and order are the most important and ramifying choices that a theorist makes (Alexander, 1982a: 65). In fact, all four volumes of Alexander's work are dedicated to demonstrating this very point, and his analysis of the work of the classics is almost exclusively focused on these questions.

Furthermore, Alexander's version of pluralism is not a particularistic one in which sociological work fragments into a number of different pieces that no longer have any shared ground on which to communicate. If anything, the reverse is true in that whilst Alexander advocates practice on a number of different levels, he still argues that such work should be assessed using a generalising, indeed universalizing standard, that brings different aspects together rather than separating them (Alexander, 1982a: 114).

Moreover, Alexander believes that communication between the different levels of the scientific continuum must be governed by standards that are capable of 'disciplined and consistent application' (Alexander, 1982a: 123), a move that demonstrates the integrative, anti-particularistic basis of Alexander's project. In sum, Alexander's response to the necessity of plurality is to sanction a plurality of activities, but to evaluate them not through a variety of different adjudicatory authorities, but rather through a rigorous, generalising standard. In relation to the modernism/postmodernism debate, it could be argued that Alexander's approach is more akin to the pluralist yet still universalist work of Habermas, than the particularistic and dis-integrative theory of Lyotard (see for example Jameson, in Lyotard, 1984: x).

The final point that I would like to make about Alexander's work relates to his approach as a whole. We saw earlier that he introduces his theory as a route

forwards for sociology out of its current crisis. However, I would like to question the usefulness of Alexander's contribution in this regard. He makes little effort to situate himself in relation to his project, either personally, or in relation to a moral position<sup>9</sup>. He does not address the wider social forces that have contributed to the current state of sociology which he so deplors. Furthermore, Alexander does not discuss sociology's place in society, and the social role which it should fulfil, preferring instead to write a huge work concerned with what are essentially technical problems. As a technical handbook, Alexander's work makes an interesting contribution. However, as an attempt to address the state of sociology and to point it in a new direction, its single-mindedly technical focus leaves it well short in terms of relevance and vision.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has been based around Gouldner's call of crisis within sociology, and the response of two important traditions, Marxism and functionalism, to this call. Gouldner's contention was that both of these traditions were reaching crisis point, and were no longer articulated to the demands of the societies in which they held sway. Consequently, the field was opened up for alternative approaches, and new frameworks of sociological analysis (including Gouldner's own prescient alternative 'reflexive sociology').

The remainder of this chapter has considered the responses to this situation from within the Marxist and functionalist camps. It is quite clear that these responses have some important underlying similarities. In the first place, both structural Marxism and neo-functionalism involve revisionist interpretations of their source traditions (Alexander, 1985: 11). In the case of structural Marxism, this revision has been largely covert, whilst neo-functionalists such as Alexander have consciously accepted that their work is not the 'true' Parsons, but that his theories require development and reworking. Secondly, both approaches contain contradictory tendencies between scientific objectivity and interpretative pluralism, in that both employ conventionalist epistemologies, but retain a commitment to discovering the truth of propositions about society. Thirdly, there are underlying conceptual similarities between their approaches. Both are general theories that build large conceptual structures to capture the world, and employ sometimes obfuscatory jargon in doing so. Perhaps most importantly, as noted by Alexander, both employ a model of society that is functionalist, emphasising the systemic and interdependent features of social

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<sup>9</sup> The only example of this is in volume one in which Alexander admits that his commitment to a multidimensional approach to action is not just a cognitive one, but a moral one (Alexander, 1982a: 124). Alexander's ideal society is one balanced between individual striving and communal identification, and one that recognises external barriers to action but also the 'concrete opportunities' for the achievement of human ideals (Alexander, 1982a: 124).

formations. Whatever their ideological differences (the desire to support or overthrow the modern capitalist system), these traditions share this central analytical focus.

Working from these analyses, it is interesting to draw out the implications of the pattern of development sketched in this chapter, particularly in relation to the closure or openness of the sociological approaches offered within. I have argued that Gouldner's work can be understood as a critique of the hegemonic structural-functional approach, thus opening up the field of sociology for the production of a wide range of new post-functionalist identities. The response of Marxism and functionalism to this plurality is an instructive one. As I have argued above, although the increasingly plural state of knowledge certainly influenced the structural Marxist and neo-functionalist positions, both traditions also retain a commitment to the 'paradigmatic' closure of their approaches. That is to say, by emphasising the importance of science and objectivity, these theories commit themselves to the production of rigorous general theory, that will be epistemologically superior to other theories, and whose reliability can feasibly provide the basis for a consensus among practitioners. Furthermore, by retaining a strong interest in the construction of functionalist, system-based theories of society, these approaches privilege the values of coherence (i.e. the coherence of the parts of a system), and closure (i.e. the clearly bounded nature of systems).

On first consideration then, it looks as if theorists such as Therborn and Alexander moved to close-off the potential openness that Gouldner had made possible. However, the picture is more complicated than this. In the first place, one can see that in Alexander's work, there is a strong commitment to overcoming the 'closures' and 'one-dimensionality' of other approaches, in favour of embracing a more open 'multi-dimensionality'. Furthermore, the history of this kind of manoeuvre suggests that there may be a certain pattern of openness and closure recurring throughout the history of sociological thought. This pattern is clearest in relation to those theorists that Alexander favours in his discussion, Weber and Parsons.

To start from the classical sociologist, Weber was clearly appreciative of the work of earlier theorists, such as Marx. However, he also felt that Marxist thought was potentially one-sided, and he wished to go beyond this closure, and create a more open, synthetic approach to social phenomena, a move obvious in his (modified) development of the Marxist notion of class so that stratification could validly embrace 'status' and 'party' too. It is, of course, this synthetic approach that recommends Weber to Alexander.

In the same way, later on, Parsons felt that the approaches of the classical sociological theorists such as Weber, Durkheim and Pareto were all extremely

valuable, but that these approaches were incomplete (unnecessarily closed) in themselves, and required a synthesis that could produce a new, multi-dimensional approach to social action. From within this newly developed and open perspective, the whole of social action could be reconceived.

This brings us to the work of Alexander himself, in which we see a similar pattern. Alexander is appreciative of those theorists who have contributed towards a multidimensional approach to social phenomena, and sees Parsons' work as the best exemplar of this tendency so far. However, even though Parsons attempted to produce a synthetic and open approach, Alexander argues that this goal was frequently undermined in Parsons' work, which instead created new closures, and in effect one-dimensional analyses. Consequently, Alexander feels that his own task is to bring about a *true* and *consistent* multi-dimensionality. However, I have argued that the openness of this approach is undermined by his commitments to science and objectivity, and the systematic underpinnings of his view of society. Thus 'Multi-dimensionality' itself, when reified as a paradigmatic label, inevitably forecloses on other options and other theoretical vocabularies.

Viewed in this way, there is an interesting pattern in the approach taken by these three theorists. Each one looks to the theories of earlier generations, and sees valuable contributions, but also one-sided closures, which they wish to transcend. They view their own approaches as more synthetic, and more encompassing, and yet each in turn is criticised by later thinkers for still retaining a one-sided or closed approach.

I would argue that this tendency, that one might term the dialectic of openness and closure, is present, to different degrees, in all of the sociological manifestos considered within this thesis. In other words, looking at previous approaches, the theorists identify the closures, divisions and exclusions within earlier work as requiring rectification. These theorists then argue that the partiality/one-sidedness of such approaches can be avoided by the new wide-ranging/multi-dimensional approach that they are offering. However, the very process of offering a new alternative creates new, 'paradigmatic' closures and boundaries, and as such leaves the theorist open to the critiques of later authors.

This kind of process is clearly illustrated in the work of Alexander and Therborn, who offer open and inclusive versions of their *source* traditions, but also create new closures of their own in the process. I would also argue, however, that the dialectic of closure and openness also operates within Gouldner's work. Although it is Gouldner that targets the closures and exclusions of the functionalist approach, with 'reflexive sociology' he offers a *replacement* for the old-style of sociology, that has new parameters and characteristics, and excludes other approaches. Consequently,

even in work that is explicitly aiming to open up the field of play ('reflexive sociology'), one typically finds a new kind of closure being effected.

In the next chapter I shall consider the work of Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman, whose manifestos attempt to break away from the problematics provided by Marxism and functionalism. In their trenchant critiques of these approaches, not least of their systematicity, Giddens and Bauman display a strong ambivalence to the classical sociological tradition altogether. However, I shall be arguing that these theorists operate within the same dialectic of openness and closure that I have outlined in this chapter, and that this sheds new, critical light on their work.

## Chapter Three

### Doubts From Within

### *Introduction*

Through the 1980s, the identity crisis in sociology has progressively deepened, largely due to the challenges presented by postmodernist thought. Postmodernist thinkers have emphasised the way in which truth claims are power claims, have thrown epistemological debates into doubt, and have insisted upon the importance of particularity and specificity over general theory. Furthermore, they have implied that rationalist traditions such as sociology require a formal commitment to intellectual and cultural closure which stops their effective response to new issues and questions.

In this chapter I shall consider the work of Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman, whose work is strongly marked by an engagement with these challenges. Once again, I shall be analysing a keynote programmatic statement made by each thinker about the state and future of sociology. As we shall see, their positions are interesting and telling responses to the tension-filled space between sociological traditionalism and postmodern pluralism, and I shall be arguing that neither thinker successfully resolves the problems inherent in this situation. But first, in spite of their familiarity, it is worth pausing to consider the status of these thinkers within the discipline of sociology.

Anthony Giddens has been described as a 'phenomenon' and a 'star' (Craib, 1992b: 1, and Bryant & Jary, 1991: 1). In fact, throughout the 1980s Giddens' status in British sociology became something approaching hegemonic. Working from the position of professor of sociology at Cambridge, his influence has been pervasive in a number of areas including the re-interpretation and analysis of classical and contemporary sociological theorists, the philosophy and sociology interface, the construction of a new version of grand theory, and the development of world-market introductory sociology textbooks. Furthermore, Giddens' own abundant release schedule (according to Bryant and Jary, twenty-three books from 1971 to 1989 and quite a few since) has been matched by the high level of critical response to his work. Totalling up the various contributions, including the Giddens Symposium in *Theory, Culture and Society*, at least two books by single authors devoted solely to Giddens' work (Craib, 1992b and Cohen, 1989), and no less than three weighty volumes of collected essays discussing his contribution, it seems plausible to suggest that few major British theoreticians have not had their say on the subject of Giddens' writings. And as we shall see, there are few areas of his approach that have not been subjected to strenuous criticism.

The other thinker considered in this chapter is Zygmunt Bauman, another major figure in British sociology. Having been educated in the continental tradition, he has brought an interest in questions of culture and interpretation to the fore in his writings. However Bauman's greatest prominence has been achieved in his recent

work, as he has turned his attention to questions of sociology's relation to modernity and postmodernity. This new high-profile was achieved at a time when Bauman was reaching the end of his academic career, having retired from his Professorship at Leeds University in 1992 to become a Professor Emeritus. It is interesting to speculate as to whether Bauman's pronouncements have gained increased gravity because of his position as an elder-statesperson addressing fresh, relevant issues in a receptive fashion. However, perhaps because of its more recent appearance, this oeuvre has not yet drawn the range of responses that Giddens' work has.

The high profile of these thinkers provides one good reason for their inclusion in this thesis. More important however is their strong disciplinary attachment to sociology, and the centrality of their work (particularly Giddens') to recent understandings of the sociological tradition. When these factors are combined with the fact that neither Giddens nor Bauman have aligned themselves with any particular social movements and have, as leading male professionals, occupied one sort of privileged social position, there would appear to be some potential for their work to take on a 'conservative', perhaps even reactionary stance. However, as we shall see, both Giddens and Bauman address the new situation of sociology without attempting to avoid the challenges to which sociological thinking must respond.

This chapter will proceed by focusing primarily upon one major manifesto statement by each thinker, to contextualise each piece in relation to current debates, and then to engage in critical discussions of their arguments. From Giddens' oeuvre, the programmatic 'Nine Theses on the Future of Sociology' (1987) strikes me as particularly significant, although it is a piece that has been surprisingly under-analysed considering the aforementioned welter of critical attention that Giddens' work has received. From Bauman, I have chosen 'Sociological Responses to Postmodernity', a central statement from his well-respected anthology *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992). Following a careful exposition and evaluation of these texts, I will offer some comparative remarks about the two thinkers in focus. I argue that while both contributions have been extremely valuable, there are aspects of their sociological self-images that are highly problematical. Moreover, whilst Bauman has been more daring in his embrace of postmodernism, his attempt to forge a suitably contemporary style for sociology is strongly compromised by the contradictions within his approach.

### *Anthony Giddens: Nine Theses*

Giddens' "Nine Theses", although they are only brief comments, provide a useful launching point for engaging with Giddens' general position, and also constitute a wide-ranging collection of suggestions for the future of sociology. He openly admits

that these statements are for the most part not predictions about the future, so much as expressions of the direction in which he would like to see sociology move (Giddens, 1987: 26). Giddens' theses fall roughly into three areas of concern - those discussing sociology's object of analysis and the scope of future sociological work, those considering the status of sociology's interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary conflicts, and those examining sociology's relations with its subject matter.

### *Sociology: Its Object and Approach*

The first group of Giddens' "Nine Theses" address questions about the sociological concept of 'society', the scale of sociological analysis, and sociology's substantive model of modernity. Addressing the first of these issues, Giddens suggests that sociology's analytical basis in the concept of 'society' is both contestable and provisional. He argues that this holistic, centralised focus has often allowed sociologists to ignore the regional differentiation of society<sup>1</sup> (Giddens, 1987: 33). Furthermore, the concept of society is rarely interrogated to expose its underpinnings in the nation-state system, that is, its relational character as an aspect of a larger (global) network<sup>2</sup> (1987: 32-3).

Giddens suggests that concentrating upon 'society' has had two unhelpful consequences for sociology. Firstly, sociologists have tended to focus exclusively upon the internal features of societies and view change as largely 'endogenous' (1987: 32-3). Secondly, apart from the Marxist tradition, there has been little sociological interest in the 'study of world systems' and questions such as the type of system involved, the international division of labour and the global military order (1987: 35-6).

These remarks emphasising the importance of global analysis, naturally lead on to Giddens' next thesis - that 'Sociologists will redevelop a concern with large-scale, long-term processes of social transformation' (Giddens, 1987: 44). Giddens notes that in recent times there has been a turn away from macro theory and towards small-scale empirical study. Although empirical work is important, such work can be usefully complemented by generalising conceptual thought which can open up new 'ways of seeing' (1987: 43). The type of questions that should be investigated on

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<sup>1</sup> This concern with issues of space-time and regionalization is a central feature of Giddens' work, and is outlined in chapter three of *The Constitution of Society* (1984).

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, this point of Giddens' has been critiqued by John Breuilly who takes Giddens' historical/contextual argument further by arguing that Giddens' use of the concept of 'nation-state' is unsubtle and fails to discriminate between different sorts of modern states (Breuilly, 1990: 284-5). One way to understand this exchange is to see it as a progressive specifying of concepts from the more abstract (society) to the more specific (different types of modern states). Perhaps the point here is that a very specific, detailed historical analysis can always undercut abstractions, but that differing levels of abstractions are useful in different contexts.

this level are those relating to the character of modernity, its origins, and an assessment of current global transformations (1987: 43).

This analysis is interesting in two respects. Firstly, Giddens' position is essentially contrary to the micro-oriented/specificity/situatedness of recent post-modernist theory. He states

How can we hope to come to terms with the nature and implications of these phenomena if we try to refrain from any portrayals of social institutions save miniatures painted with a fine-grained brush? (Giddens, 1987: 43)

Consequently, Giddens places grand(ish) narratives back on the agenda, and argues that without such a style of analysis the present cannot be properly understood and reflected upon.

Giddens' approach here is a useful corrective to postmodernist approaches. However, his argument is not completely satisfactory. At a time when the authority and certainty of sociology has been undermined by the rising social movements and French philosophy, it seems inappropriate for Giddens to evade the important epistemological questions of how knowledge about modernity can be reliably produced. His response to arguments such as those offered by Lyotard is extremely curt and insubstantial (Giddens, 1990: 46-7). This evasion of epistemological issues is a feature of Giddens' work more generally (for example, see Giddens, 1984: xx), and has been critiqued by writers such as McLennan (1984: 124) and Kilminster (1991: 106). One does not have to concur with the postmodern critiques to believe that they require some reasoned answer.

Another interesting way to contextualise Giddens' remarks about long-term processes is in relation to his strong opposition to evolutionism in the social sciences. He argues that 'human history does not have an evolutionary 'shape', and positive harm can be done by attempting to compress it into one' (Giddens, 1984: 236). However, one might ask, is it not the case that Giddens' professed interest in long-term, large-scale transformations re-instanciates the type of analysis that had apparently been ruled out? And if this is true, then hasn't Giddens been over-hasty in ruling evolutionary theory completely out of court? To answer these questions we must briefly consider some of Giddens' methodological objections to evolutionism.

Giddens puts forward five such objections (1984: 233-243). He argues that: (i) evolutionary thinkers tend to presume that a specific occurrence (such as the transition from feudalism to capitalism) is part of a general, necessary sequence; (ii) some evolutionary theories mistakenly conflate social evolution with individual personality development; (iii) there is a tendency for evolutionary theories to presume the moral superiority of those at the head of the evolutionary scale, typically modern Western countries; (iv) there is often a presumption in evolutionary theory that

elapsed time is the same thing as change; (v) most evolutionary theories rely on the concept of adaptation which is spurious when applied to human beings.

I am in substantial agreement with the sentiments expressed by Giddens in regard to evolutionary theory. However, it seems that subtle evolutionary theory can avoid these misdemeanours. Stephen Sanderson (1990) has undertaken the project of critically evaluating evolutionary theories, and he suggests that many such theories are guilty of the errors that Giddens draws attention to. Nevertheless, he also argues that a subtle evolutionary theory that avoids these problems can be an invaluable explanatory aid. Sanderson lays out a charter for an adequate social evolutionary theory that contains nine guiding propositions, two examples of which are (i) the importance of recognising 'general directional trends in world history' while also acknowledging the 'many forms' of 'historical uniqueness and divergence'; (ii) the necessity of rejecting developmentalist or determinist interpretations of history and thus being 'antiteleological' (Sanderson, 1990: 223). This charter, for the most part, successfully meets Giddens' objections to evolutionary theory<sup>3</sup>.

Consequently, although I agree with Giddens' general points about evolutionism, his suggestion that we should 'break...with it in a radical way' unhelpfully rules out subtle, useful forms of evolutionary theory (Giddens, 1984: 239). It is unfortunate that a thinker such as Giddens who so often manages a balanced interpretation of theoretical matters, contributes to the polarisation of the pro/anti-evolutionary debate in this way.

Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the concepts that Giddens has developed to understand long-term processes, such as the variation of time-space distanciation, are 'quasi-evolutionary' in themselves (McLennan, 1990: 139). As McLennan argues, Giddens proposes a model of history in which the groups or societies that tend to prevail are those 'who can best adapt to/produce/control enhanced time-space distanciation' (McLennan, 1990: 139). On this reading, Giddens' model looks nothing less than unilinear, a facet that is ironically one of his key objections to evolutionary theory. This point about Giddens' own theory emphasises the curious nature of his strong rejection of evolutionism.

Giddens' next thesis addresses one of the large-scale questions that he has earlier posed- 'what is the character of modernity?' He suggests that sociology (and in particular Marxism) still retains a nineteenth century tendency to analyse modernity

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<sup>3</sup> I believe that Sanderson provides a viable model for evolutionary theory, except in his claims about the vexing concept of adaptation. Sanderson argues that adaptations are best understood as occurring at the level of the individual, and as 'cost-benefit calculations' to individual circumstances (Sanderson, 1990: 224). This formulation has two problems. Firstly, since human conduct is strongly shaped by generalized socio-cultural influences, it seems implausible to suggest that adaptation can occur purely at the level of the individual. Secondly, and relatedly, a rejection of the 'cost-benefit' model of human behaviour is arguably one of the founding points of classical sociology, and such a model is surely an unsatisfactory basis for a sociological evolutionary theory.

primarily in relation to the economic transformations that occurred. Instead, an analysis of the unique properties of modernity should be multi-dimensional which means acknowledging that the rise of administrative power, the industrialisation of military force and developments in the autonomous realm of culture are each as important to the configuration of modernity as economic changes (Giddens, 1987: 27-9). Giddens concludes that 'the future of sociology will not be bound up with a preponderant concern with the organising concepts of Marxist thought' (1987: 29).

These comments, brief though they are, raise a number of crucial issues about Giddens' work. The first point of interest is the changing nature of Giddens' relationship with Marxism. In his earlier works the appraisal of Marxist thought occupied a central place, emphasised by the fact that in 1981 Giddens published the first volume of a sustained critical interaction with Marxism entitled *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, the second volume appearing in 1985. However, the final volume of this set was never written because of Giddens' declining assessment of Marxism's contemporary relevance<sup>4</sup>. Elsewhere, he elucidates his reasons for this, arguing that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of the welfare state, combined with the emergence of radical politics that owe little to Marxism, have combined to make Marxist thought more and more irrelevant<sup>5</sup> (1995: x-xii).

The next important point to consider about Giddens' characterisation of modernity is the accuracy of his portrayal of the modern period, in that Giddens' brief comments in 'Nine Theses' allude to his sizeable historical work, *The Nation State and Violence* (1985). One curiosity of his account is Giddens' choice to prioritise the development of administrative power over features such as the increasing prevalence of democratic/representative bodies, which appear to have been central to the changes of the modern era (Breuilly, 1990: 283-4). This point is backed up by Breuilly's argument that the Foucauldian theses upon which Giddens' claims about administrative power are based, have been shown to be of questionable validity when applied to those sites central to his analysis (prisons for example), and even more doubtful when extended to society in general (Breuilly, 1990: 283-4).

More damning in my opinion, is Giddens' failure to prioritise the experience of women in his discussion of the defining features of modernity. This is part of a wider absence in Giddens' work. For instance, the women's movement does get a brief mention in Vol 2 of *A Contemporary Critique*, but only as a somewhat *ad hoc*

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<sup>4</sup> According to its preface, Giddens' recent *Beyond Left and Right* (1994) contains some of the ideas that he had planned to include in the third volume of *CCHM*, and he states that the third volume never appeared because of his changing interests.

<sup>5</sup> Giddens nicely illustrates the changing fortunes of Marxism by pointing out that whilst Habermas was once the subject of disparagement from main-stream Marxists, he can now be considered 'orthodox' as so many other Marxists have abandoned their beliefs (1995: xii).

addition to one of the multitude of diagrams and taxonomies that Giddens sometimes demonstrates a worrying disposition towards<sup>6</sup>. As Linda Murgatroyd points out, Giddens occasionally gestures towards the relevance of investigating women's experience, but frustratingly fails to develop his work to accommodate this (Murgatroyd, 1989: 148).

In the specific case of Giddens' analysis of modernity, the absence of a discussion of women may be the consequence of another fault with Giddens' approach. As both Craib and Kilminster point out, Giddens seems overly concerned to demonstrate the specificity of the modern period and its discontinuity with that which has come before<sup>7</sup> (Craib, 1992b: 133, Kilminster, 1991: 87). One consequence of this is an underplaying in Giddens' work of those factors that are relevant to the experience of modernity but not unique to it, such as the oppression of women.

One might also note that Giddens' axes of modernity are primarily concerned with public, rather than private, experience. If Giddens was indeed to try to include the experience of women, the logical point of entry would be a discussion of the public/private split that has been a central feature in women's experience of modernity (see for instance Smith, 1987: 5). Although Giddens has been more concerned than many male theorists with the 'private' aspects of experience (see for example his volume *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992)), this has unfortunately not been translated back into his large-scale analyses. Consequently his work in this important respect is, at best, incomplete.

### *Divisions Within and Without*

The next major theme addressed in Giddens' essay is the status of inter-disciplinary and intra-disciplinary divisions. It is here that he is most concerned to post a 'sociological self-image' which feels distinctly of the moment. The central thread in his argument is that many of the familiar disciplinary divisions in the social sciences hark back to the nineteenth century, and may simply not be relevant in the present-day context. In particular, Giddens suggests that anthropology and political science are areas that, examined in terms of the general ethos and work being produced today, reveal no important conceptual differences with sociology, and thus have strong potential for cross-pollination or even disciplinary unification (Giddens, 1987: 38, 40). Furthermore the study of history too has important similarities to sociology, although there are relevant differences, such as the division of labour in which historians focus their efforts upon a detailed 'recovery of the past' (1987: 39).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, one answer to the question of why Giddens has not dealt with the experience of women in detail is that there was no room for it in one of his boxes.

<sup>7</sup> Craib suggests that when this point is combined with Giddens' rejection of evolutionary theory, it may seem that his project involves a 'rejection of history as a source of understanding and knowledge for the present' (Craib, 1992b: 133).

Even so, perhaps only economics (particularly under the current neo-classical framework) represents a disciplinary approach which is clearly antagonistic to that of sociology (1987: 39-41).

With these arguments, Giddens distances himself from the paradigmatic logic that I discussed in Chapter One, suggesting the interwoven nature of different disciplinary approaches, and refusing the attempt to differentiate sociology in terms of its special methodology or perspective. This manoeuvre clearly works to loosen the bonds of the sociological tradition, opening up the field for a more generalised and eclectic perspective upon social theory. However, this openness is somewhat undermined by Giddens' other thesis regarding sociology's disciplinarity.

Giddens suggests that there is a developing potential for unity *within* the discipline of sociology, in particular a unity underwritten by a new, shared theoretical basis. Although he acknowledges that the goal of a theoretical language with a 'distinct conceptual unity' is an impossible one, Giddens does hold that the fragmentation of sociological schools which occurred throughout the 1970s should not be thought of as leading to a complete breakdown in comparative evaluation (Giddens, 1987: 29-31). After all, he suggests, it is possible to assess different theories to some degree by means of empirical research (1987: 31). Furthermore, he sees a new theoretical synthesis emerging out of the conflicts between competing schools.

One point of convergence in this synthesis is an acknowledgment of the intrinsic links between sociology and the social actors that constitute its subject-matter, a relationship in which sociological findings "'spiral in and out" of social life', and sociological knowledge is modified by its 'incorporation within the tissue of social life itself' (Giddens, 1987: 31-2). Another aspect of the new synthesis is a rejection of the idea that human behaviour is merely a product of social causes, but conversely an acknowledgment of the 'significance of institutional constraints' upon action (1987: 31-2).

These comments are interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it is worth highlighting the blandness and vagueness of these statements. In particular, the second point of convergence that Giddens offers appears merely to be a reformulation of the basic problematic in which sociology has always operated.

The second important point about these comments is the fact that Giddens' endorsement of a new shared theoretical basis returns us to a rather more paradigmatic, or closed view of sociology, in which a shared basis or paradigm is a good thing. In this respect, Giddens reverses the moves that he has just made towards a pluralised social theory, and stakes out a particular space for sociology to operate within.

A similar tension is noticeable with respect to Giddens' wider project, that is the development of structuration theory<sup>8</sup>. Although Giddens sometimes describes his work in various modest ways (as 'firing critical salvos into reality', (Giddens, 1982: 72), or as 'a sensitizing device' (Giddens, 1989: 294)) he also has an explicit intention to perform constructive theorizing. That is to say, he is unhappy with a purely deconstructive, destabilizing approach to social theory and proposes that 'social theory stands in need of systematic reconstruction' (Giddens, 1979: 240). This reconstruction is to provide a 'more satisfactory ground for the discussion of central issues in social theory' (Giddens, 1979: 240). The grand theoretical nature of Giddens' structuration theory is apparent here, as it is intended to be the general 'paradigm' that can provide a basis for the systematic reconstruction of sociology's conceptual basis. Consequently, as McLennan (1984) points out, on different occasions Giddens offers two, mutually contradictory characterisations of his work, both of which cannot be correct. His ambivalence between these two positions might, if carefully explicated, be considered to demonstrate a sensitivity to the merits of each position, but as Giddens does not provide such an account, he appears instead contradictory, and indecisive.

### *Sociological Knowledge and its Subjects*

The links between sociological knowledge and its subjects are addressed in depth in the third group of theses. Considering these connections, Giddens discusses the role of sociology in formulating 'practical social policies or reforms' (Giddens, 1987: 44). He notes that in recent times many Western governments have decreased their reliance on interventionist social policy, instead leaving matters of distribution to the market (1987: 45). Giddens believes that these market-driven policies will soon fall by the wayside, and governments will turn to interventionist social policy again. However, he argues that sociologists should not adopt their old role in social policy, a role in which their contribution was often as technicians facilitating whatever results governments' desired (1987: 45).

Instead, Giddens thinks that sociologists should take a more active role in social policy formulation<sup>9</sup>, not just in relations with policy makers, but in a tripartite scheme in which the third group is those affected by the proposed policies (1987: 47). He terms this a 'dialogical' model for research, that aims to ensure that those affected by policies are actively involved in the determination of their future. This, according to Giddens, is desirable for three reasons. In terms of sheer practicality, he suggests

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<sup>8</sup> The two tenets that Giddens lists as part of the new, shared theoretical base for sociology, are also central features of his structuration theory.

<sup>9</sup> Giddens himself has recently taken a more political stance, and his recent book *Beyond Left and Right* embraces a more accessible, journalistic style of writing in an attempt to communicate his ideas to a wider audience.

that because subjects are reflexive they cannot simply be manipulated to behave in some prescribed fashion. Consequently an important consideration in policy making is the 'potentiality of persuading actors to expand or modify the forms of knowledge of [sic] belief they draw upon in organizing their contexts of action' (Giddens, 1987: 47). The issue here is not only practicality however, but also an acknowledgment that when agents are presented with knowledge they are capable of 'inferring its implications for their activities' (1987: 47).

Secondly, Giddens suggests that social research has important functions aside from establishing generalizations. In particular, he contends that researchers should use social research to communicate the conditions of existence of one 'cultural setting' to those in other cultural settings (1987: 47). This 'anthropological moment' is crucial for informing researchers and opening up 'possible fields of action' that were 'previously unperceived' (Giddens, 1987:47-8).

Thirdly, the importance of the 'double hermeneutic' must be emphasised. This involves the realization that social scientific knowledge is constantly being absorbed by its subject matter, a process that constitutes and reconstitutes the 'subject-matter' in question (1987: 48).

These points regarding research open up a veritable Pandora's Box of debates regarding Giddens' work, and wider questions about the authority of social scientific research. The first contentious issue is Giddens' usage of the concept of 'double hermeneutic'. Giddens uses this term to demonstrate the twofold process of social-scientific understanding, the first being the afore-mentioned 'anthropological moment' where the interpretations of social actors must be understood, and the second being the reformulation of these interpretations into the 'meta-language' of the social sciences (eg Giddens, 1984: 284). This formulation of Giddens' can be seen, as Held and Thompson suggest, as a compromise between hermeneutic and structuralist philosophies of social science (Held & Thompson, 1989: 5). However, it is a compromise that is not without its difficulties.

The key problem, as Kilminster points out, is that Giddens sees a hermeneutical approach as a condition of the validity of sociological knowledge, rather than a denial of that very possibility. Kilminster argues that a full acknowledgment of the relevance of hermeneutics leads to a relativism in which 'conditions of validity' have no purchase (Kilminster, 1991: 105). Bauman pushes this point further by suggesting that Giddens fails to establish the grounds on which a social scientific account has authority and validity over and above the accounts of social actors (Bauman, 1989: 48).

To return these points to the current discussion, these debates raise the question of why sociologists have the right to be involved in 'social reform' over and above, say,

artists or plumbers. After all, Giddens casts sociologists as the providers of 'knowledge' that is supplied to social actors on the basis that they will infer its relevance to their position. Giddens does not however explain why sociologists' 'knowledge' is valuable or reliable. Furthermore, the idea of opening up 'possible fields of action' takes a distinctly different cast when considered from a Foucauldian perspective in which it might appear to be the production of new fields for power/knowledge to operate in.

A justification for Giddens' position could perhaps be given in terms of an argument about the special or privileged nature of sociological knowledge, but this would of course plunge Giddens into the realm of epistemology where he is reluctant to tread. Alternatively, a Habermasian notion of emancipatory interest might be wheeled in to do service, emphasising the importance of a goal such as an 'ideal speech situation', but once again Giddens has emphatically rejected such notions (eg Giddens, 1989: 291). Consequently, his position on sociological interventionism seems to be insufficiently justified, and Giddens has revealed once more a tendency to paint himself into an intellectual corner.

A further curiosity of Giddens' approach is his somewhat inconsistent treatment of the status of knowledge. Sometimes Giddens' arguments take a liberal cast<sup>10</sup> in which agents are supplied with knowledge that they use to deduce the consequences for their own situation. Once this has been done, they modify their behaviour accordingly. Underlying this view is the idea of a rational individual utilising 'neutral' knowledge to their best interests.

At other times, Giddens suggests that knowledge is a 'constituting' force over individuals which implies a more Foucauldian position as to the effects of knowledge. On the latter view subjects are produced as effects of certain knowledge processes, rather than using knowledge to further their own interests. This inconsistency is another troubling aspect of Giddens' approach.

The importance of the capacities of social actors is demonstrated in another of Giddens' theses, that social movements will continue to provide a stimulus to the 'sociological imagination' (Giddens, 1987: 48). In particular, the dynamism of social movements often challenges established categories of sociological thought. As an example of this, Giddens cites the way in which the ecological movement directed attention towards the effects of capitalism and industrialism upon the environment (1987: 49). Giddens also notes the important impact that the women's movement has had on sociology generating a whole new set of far-reaching questions that sociology must attempt to deal with, questions about the nature of society and also about the conceptual forms of sociology (1987: 50).

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<sup>10</sup> The influence of liberalism on Giddens' work is documented by Kilminster (1991: 78-80).

These claims are important in that they move, once again, to open up sociology beyond its classical tradition, and invite it to consider the new problems posed by current social conditions. By acknowledging the value of this, Giddens moves beyond the neo-traditionalist approaches considered in Chapter Two, and towards a conception of sociology with more contemporary relevance.

Giddens concludes his manifesto by stating that in the future, sociology will remain as controversial as ever. He argues that in one respect sociology should actually attempt to retain its unpopularity, the unpopularity generated by disclosing 'unpleasant truths' and challenging the views of the powerful (1987: 50-1). Giddens suggests that performing such a role will make the future of sociology as vital and turbulent as its past.

This is stirring stuff, and no doubt represents the aspirations that many people have as sociologists. However, this espousal of what is essentially a traditional critical approach sits oddly with those of Giddens' sentiments that express a more disruptive attitude to 'the tradition'. Attempts to synthesize such poles have been a central part of Giddens' theoretical work, and yet one is left wondering, with Hirst (1982), whether Giddens is being synthetically eclectic or merely syncretic, coherently dualist or deceptively Janus-faced.

### *Summary: Ambivalence or Confusion?*

Giddens' "Nine Theses", like the components of his structuration theory, are a mixed bag. For the purposes of this thesis there are four central points to his contribution. Firstly, he usefully re-emphasises the importance of macro-analysis at a time when such analysis has become devalued. Unfortunately, he does not contribute to the important epistemological debate around the validity conditions for such analyses.

Secondly, Giddens' own attempts at a macro-analysis of the institutional features of modernity provide an interesting starting-point for discussion. They are certainly not conclusive, however, and I have pointed towards the weaknesses of his choices, particular in terms of the experience of women.

Thirdly, Giddens seems to wobble between open and closed conceptions of the sociological tradition. On the one hand, he argues that sociology is not a special field that is decisively different from social theorising more generally, and he also opens sociology to questions arising from outside the tradition, in particular those posed by the new social movements. On the other hand, Giddens argues that sociology has once again found a new consensual basis for analysis, and he suggests that this is an improvement over the confusion of the 1970s. This tension is reflected more widely in Giddens' uncertainty as to the status of his own structuration theory.

Fourthly, Giddens' approach to sociological research is a worthy attempt to include social actors in the process of policy making. With regard to his argument, I have suggested that it is somewhat unclear as to the actual status of knowledge in relation to social actors. Furthermore, I would argue that Giddens does not provide a satisfactory justification for the power of the sociologist in the research process.

From these points I would conclude that Giddens' position, whilst interesting and challenging in some respects, often seems to be under-specified or even contradictory. In relation to questions surrounding macro-theory, the status of the sociological tradition, and sociological research interventions, some further defence of Giddens' position is urgently required for it to be accepted as either coherent or persuasive.

### *Zygmunt Bauman: The Arrival of Postmodernity*

The central question posed by 'Sociological Responses To Postmodernity' can be glossed as 'how should sociology respond to all this talk of postmodernism?'. For Bauman, these responses can be placed into one of three categories: postmodern sociology, sociology against postmodernity, and sociology of postmodernity. However, before exploring these options, we need to briefly consider his characterisation of postmodernism.

Bauman suggests that the postmodern condition is paradigmatically expressed by the state of contemporary art, with its random changes of direction, rejection of depth models, and 'defiance of order' (Bauman, 1992: 27-8). More specifically, he argues that a postmodern viewpoint is one that accepts the 'irreducibility and permanence of the plurality of human worlds' (1992: 29). That is to say, postmodernism as a doctrine emphasises the way in which the social world does not fit together, and contains no unifying tendencies, instead consisting of a disparate range of viewpoints and 'realities'. This links his views to those of Lyotard (1984), who holds that objectivity has been dissipated, grand-narratives have lost their credibility and the hierarchy of language games has been dissolved leaving a plurality of games operating on an equal footing (Bauman, 1992: 35-8).

### *Postmodern Sociology*

With postmodernism characterised as such, we can now consider the first element of Bauman's typology, postmodern sociology. According to Bauman, postmodern sociology can be understood as a pragmatic response to the postmodern condition (1992: 41-2). The main feature of this response is a tacit acceptance that the world is indeed as Lyotard describes it, that is a plurality of language-games/communities each generating its own values/meanings/worlds. Postmodern sociologists, such as Susan

Hekman, adapt to these new conditions by becoming 'interpreters', and deploying methods such as 'thick description' to make the values of a community seem intelligible and valuable in their own right, aiding the process of communication between different 'forms of life' (1992: 41-2). Taking such an approach sociologists reject their earlier historical role as theorists who attempt to 'decode...meanings as products, reflections' (1992: 26). Instead these sociologists accept 'the self-grounding of the production and reproduction of meanings' (1992: 26).

Bauman's principal criticism of postmodern sociology is that it has no concept of postmodernity (Bauman, 1992: 41). That is to say, it does not tie its efficacy and development to a particular historical moment, and thus sees its role as the 'rectification of blunder' and 'discovery of truth' rather than an adaptation to a 'transformed object of study' (1992: 41). As such, Bauman argues that postmodern sociology paradoxically retains the universalistic underpinning that characterised the modernist sociology it ostensibly rejects. On this account, postmodern sociology believes that it has discovered the 'perpetual (though heretofore overlooked) essences of social life in general' (1992: 41).

I strongly concur with Bauman on this point. Much of the critical literature on the subject of postmodernism cheerfully points out that by extensively critiquing modernity, 'post' theorists establish post-modernity as an advance over modernity, implying that it is a development in the grander scheme of things (a quintessentially 'modern' attitude). Similarly, in challenging the philosophical basis of modernity as consisting of a rationalist, realist, universalism, post-modern thought often seems to offer not an absence of metaphysics (as is often claimed<sup>11</sup>), but instead a counter-ontology of 'total flux and undecideability' in which ambivalence, fragmentation and pluralism are prioritised (McLennan, 1995b: 397, 399). By rejecting postmodern sociology, Bauman intelligently rejects a simple conversion to the philosophically inspired postmodern metaphysic, instead searching for a more promising sociologically grounded approach.

### *Sociology Against Postmodernity*

The second element of Bauman's typology is termed 'sociology against postmodernity', a category within which Bauman places theorists such as Christopher Lasch, Jürgen Habermas and Claus Offe. These theorists, according to Bauman '*deny the novelty of the present situation*', that is to say they believe that the model of modern society is still the 'essential paradigm of social analysis' (Bauman, 1992: 43, [emphasis Bauman's]). Such theorists typically treat postmodernity as a sign of the crisis of the modern social system, a crisis explained by features such as

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this point see Benhabib (1992: 223-5).

the '*inner contradictions of capitalism, limits to rationalization, or civilization and its discontents*' (1992: 43, [emphasis Bauman's]). Consequently, within the paradigm of sociology against postmodernity, the elements of a postmodern configuration are seen as 'symptoms of disease, rather than manifestations of new normality' (1992: 48).

Bauman objects to sociology against postmodernity on two grounds. On the one hand, he argues that those theorists who, following Christopher Lasch, emphasise the importance of changes in culture and personality typically do not problematise the role of sociology. Consequently, the question of whether sociology is 'historically geared to "classical" modernity' is not addressed (Bauman, 1992: 48). On the other hand, theorists of 'system-in crisis' such as Habermas do address this issue, but assign 'priority to the theoretical redemption of the orthodox model' which gives postmodernity the status of an 'aberration' (1992: 48). As a result, neither version of sociology against postmodernity is tenable.

I would like at this point to highlight an interesting aspect of Bauman's rhetoric. As McLennan points out, Bauman frames the debate in a way that rather ironically reproduces a classically modernist, dialectical style of argumentation (McLennan, 1995a: 118). That is to say that the first pole of the argument, postmodern sociology, represents a too hasty embrace of the phenomena of postmodernism, whereas the other pole, sociology against postmodernity, is characterised as an untenably reactionary position. Consequently, the third option that we are being led towards is produced as the 'most rational and sensitive one' (McLennan, 1995a: 118).

### *Sociology of Postmodernity*

Bauman terms the third sociological response to postmodernism 'sociology of postmodernity' in which postmodernity is understood to be a 'fully-fledged, comprehensive and viable type of social system' (Bauman, 1992: 49). Thus postmodernity should be analysed as a 'cohesive aggregate' of phenomena in which 'principles of systematic organization' and 'power arrangements' have been transformed (1992: 48, 26).

The main thrust of this approach is that postmodernity is a good thing, and is here to stay. Four claims are central here: (i) that capitalism is now a secure system (Bauman, 1992: 51); (ii) that work has been replaced by consumption as the linchpin of the '*individual, social and systemic levels*' (1992: 49 [emphasis Bauman's]); (iii) that the vast majority of citizens exist in a heightened state of individual, consumer freedom, seduced into a happy state (1992: 50-1); (iv) that the only 'realistic' alternative to capitalist consumerism is repression and disenfranchisement (1992: 53).

According to Bauman this development explains common perceptions of the postmodern condition such as those of Lyotard. Lyotard, as we saw above, argues that meta-narratives have lost their credibility and that there are no longer centralised truth-authorising agencies, these being displaced by a plurality of self-authorising language games. However, for Bauman these developments are epiphenomenal, reflecting a wider structural change in which capitalism no longer needs to use tactics such as '*consensus-aimed political legitimation, ideological domination*' or '*uniformity of norms promoted by cultural hegemony*' to secure its reproduction (Bauman, 1992: 51-2, [emphasis Bauman's]). Consequently, the cultural sphere, or 'lifeworld' is no longer subject to the homogenising pressures of system reproduction and in fact, in capitalism's new phase, the heterogeneity of culture is desirable (Bauman, 1992: 52).

That Bauman's characterisation of postmodernity is currently held in high regard may, on a brief consideration, seem a little mysterious. After all, the central themes of his claims are little different to those offered earlier this century by theorists of post-industrial society such as Daniel Bell (1973). Such a judgement would be somewhat unfair however. Bauman has arguably recontextualised these ideas from a 'postmodern' perspective and espouses them in a fluid and attractive style that contributes usefully to a number of serious contemporary puzzles. Furthermore, his move to sociologise the 'cultural' phenomena of postmodernism is a welcome development. For these very reasons, however, it is worth considering objections to his account.

It is surprising that for an often discriminating and critical thinker, Bauman sometimes sounds more like a veritable ideologue in support of this new social system. When reading his account I find myself wondering where exactly the capitalist paradise that he outlines exists. Does Zygmunt Bauman really see such strife-torn, alienated, divided (on gender, class, ethnic and religious lines) societies such as Great Britain and the United States as stable and viable social systems<sup>12</sup>? Such idealism is also apparent in that Bauman does not consider the possible environmental consequences of a mass-consumption society, the twin matters of pollution and resource-exhaustion. These environmental problems must surely constitute a sizeable threat to the future viability of consumerism, especially if the whole of the globe is to become a consumer paradise.

It could well be, as Graham Murdock suggests, that Bauman's uncritical account is a result of his eagerness to 'claim a *fait accompli*' (Murdock, 1993: 537 [emphasis Murdock's]). Murdock argues that whilst consumerism is 'undoubtedly central to

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<sup>12</sup> Even if Bauman's account is correct, his description recalls the utopia/distopia of Huxley's *Brave New World* (1960), and as Huxley aptly illustrates, it is not at all clear whether life as a contented consumer can really be considered the zenith of human experience.

late modernity' other 'rhetorics' such as those of social justice and citizenship cannot be satisfied by consumer pleasures (Murdock, 1993: 537). Keith Doubt amplifies this point about Bauman's approach, suggesting that his

empathy for his subject moves him to assume the role of worldly statesman and sophisticated exegete for a subject that he seeks to explicate critically (Doubt, 1993: 286).

The consequence of this empathy and enthusiasm is the failure to distinguish between what *is* (postmodernity) and what *ought to be* (something that a critical sociology might aspire to establish) (Doubt, 1993: 286).

### *Revising Modernist Sociology*

Having made a case for the novelty and viability of postmodernity, Bauman elaborates upon how a sociology of postmodernity should operate in these altered conditions. He argues that 'from its birth, sociology was an adjunct of modernity' and established its 'cognitive horizons' within the framework set by the rationalising activities of the modern state (Bauman, 1992: 54). More damningly, Bauman suggests that sociology's 'underlying world-view, its conceptual apparatus' and 'its strategy' were all 'geared to' the practices and ambitions of the modern state, making it a 'theory and service discipline of modernity' (1992: 54). As such sociology must rethink its conceptual categories.

In response to this claim I would argue that it is a serious mischaracterisation of sociology to suggest that it was an ever-willing servant of modernity. One only needs to go as far as the work of Robert Nisbet to see that sociology has occupied a far more complex and ambivalent relation to modernity than Bauman's incautious remarks suggest. In *The Sociological Tradition*, Nisbet argues that sociology has historically operated in the paradoxical realm between modernist impulses and conservative (pre-modern) preoccupations such as 'community, authority, tradition' and 'the sacred' (Nisbet, 1970: 17-8). As Nisbet points out, even a modernist *par excellence* such as Durkheim turned to medieval society to establish his model of occupational associations (Nisbet, 1970: 16). Consequently, it seems that Bauman's assertions about sociology oversimplify matters.

Regardless, Bauman goes on to outline two areas in which sociology's classical conceptual apparatus is deficient. The first precept that he suggests must be reformulated is that of structure. Bauman argues that the image of the social world as a '*cohesive totality*' that is structured before the processes of '*interaction between individual and group agents*' has recently been reconceived to account for the way in which what are apparently structures are in fact 'construed and reconstrued in the course of interaction' (Bauman, 1992: 54 [emphasis Bauman's]). In line with these

alterations, human agency and power has been attributed a more central place in sociological discourse (1992: 54). To establish this claim Bauman cites work such as that of Alan Touraine, on the pliability of social reality in the form of social movements, groups that are 'self-constituting' (Bauman, 1992: 55). Significantly, Bauman also quotes the work of Anthony Giddens in this regard, arguing that Giddens' structuration theory, being 'action-oriented' is 'better geared to the task of theorizing an un-predetermined, flexible social reality' (1992: 55).

Bauman makes a point of signal importance here, emphasising the recent sociological shift away from structural analyses. It is here that Bauman marks out the way in which theorists such as himself and Giddens attempt to break away from the more traditional frameworks that I considered in Chapter Two, emphasising flexibility and negotiation over systematicity and rigidity. How far this can and should go is another matter.

One might argue, for example, that if the 'structuring tendencies' of society are at a low ebb, then there is little or no place for traditional sociological approaches whatsoever. After all, sociology, from Comte onwards, has operated by identifying patterns of *determination* within social groups, what Therborn called the 'ideological community'. If these determinations are now at a minimum, then sociology's central explanatory mechanism is outmoded. Instead, sociologists will have to be content with offering post-hoc accounts of the 'flexible' and 'agentic' behaviour of social actors, accepting the necessary unpredictability of social behaviour. Perhaps it would be valuable for sociologists to take on such a role, but a rescindment of the structuring tendencies of society seems to me to be premature, and I suspect that many other sociologists would agree that there remain important structural forces that organise the experience of social actors, forces that can be usefully explicated by a traditional sociological approach.

Bauman's other claim is that the concept of 'society' can no longer be an effective starting point for sociological theorising. He suggests that even during the height of the unifying powers of the state, the concept of society as a 'sealed totality' was only a useful approximation. Furthermore, under postmodern conditions, taking 'society' as the basis for analysis is even less appropriate (Bauman, 1992: 56-7).

For one thing, the porousness of societies has become more evident, and if one is to analyse the actions of a state, this must be done relationally, considering the actions of other states in '*inter-state space*' (1992: 57-8). Bauman strongly contends that existing models of '*international relations*' are mistaken in assuming that conflict between states can be modelled upon conflict between people (1992: 61-3). He also suggests that to truly grasp the nature of postmodernity it should be considered whether the state of postmodernity only applies to certain societies in the world which

occupy the 'unique position' of consuming a large part of the world's resources (1992: 59). It may be that postmodern culture and luxury rests upon the subjugation of other non-Western nations, but Bauman suggests that sociology is currently too poorly equipped to analyse the social space outside of the nation state, and thus cannot establish the truth of this conjecture (1992: 59).

### *Giddens and Bauman: An Evaluation of their Contribution*

As becomes obvious from a survey of their work, Giddens and Bauman have importantly similar preoccupations. One interesting cross-over is that Giddens' work demonstrates exactly the same concerns as those which Bauman delineates as characteristic of his favoured category, sociology of postmodernity. So, as is evident in his structuration theory, Giddens shares Bauman's concern for acknowledging the fluidity of 'structures' and their production and reconstrual through the process of societal interaction. Furthermore, both theorists emphasise the problems with taking the concept of society for granted, and the importance of analysing global 'inter-state' spaces.

However, there is an important difference in the way that these theorists establish these claims. This difference is demonstrated by the criticism that Bauman directs towards Giddens for being unclear as to whether his revision of the concept of structure involves saving social theory from its false 19th century assumptions (a universalising task *a la* postmodern sociology) or updating social theory for a new context (the historicist approach that Bauman takes). I would argue that Giddens' approach leans towards the former, as he casts his structuration theory as a 'social ontology', that is a set of metaphysical claims about the possible forms that action may take. Furthermore, Giddens' arguments about the problems with the sociological concept of society imply that this has always been a problem with sociological approaches, rather than one produced by recent social developments.

One consequence of Bauman's choice to historicise sociological categories is that he legitimates the sociological tradition by suggesting that *in their time* the analytical focus upon 'society' and structure were substantially correct. It is thus only now that the world system has been transformed that these concepts need amending. In some respects this approach allows Bauman to have the best of both worlds, providing a sop for traditionalists as well as aligning himself with those pushing forward. I have misgivings about this position however, especially in light of Bauman's historicized claims about the centrality of work to sociological theory in the nineteenth century. In light of recent critiques by women, and non-Western ethnic groups, it seems unduly complacent for Bauman to emphasise the historical importance of work without referring to the crucial contributions to systemic reproduction made by

unpaid domestic labour and colonialist policies. As a result, Bauman's historicist understanding of sociological categories can be found wanting.

Furthermore, although Bauman raises an important question about Giddens' work, that is how appropriate it is for a sociologist to make universalizing theoretical claims, Bauman himself does not evade this problem. Although a historicizing thesis may appear to be diametrically opposed to one that makes universalizing claims, unless such a thesis is a radical one that denies the possibility of having knowledge of different historical eras<sup>13</sup>, there is still a universal underpinning to such claims. Being able to know and understand the differences between historical eras, in other words, presupposes a type of discourse that can universally 'express' or 'capture' these distinct features and thus achieves a generality that reaches outside its historical position. Consequently, although Bauman attempts to authorise his thesis in a 'postmodern' fashion, his historicist claims merely gesture towards larger, as yet unresolved problems<sup>14</sup>. Bauman's apparent pluralism and contextualism turns out to be just another form of universalism in disguise.

The next interesting feature of these manifesto statements is the authors' theoretical response to the challenges posed by postmodernist thinkers. As we have seen, Giddens re-instates macro-analysis as an important part of sociological analysis, against the postmodernist trend. However, he fails to defend this position sufficiently on an epistemological level.

Bauman's approach is best characterised as a compromise between traditional sociological and postmodernist thinking. On the one hand, Bauman urges us to rethink the central categories of modernist sociology, suggesting, as we have seen, a revision of the tightly-bound notion of structure. On the other hand, Bauman still deploys 'modernist' concepts to account for the large-scale changes from modern to postmodern society. Some of these concepts are presented very openly, such as Bauman's claim that postmodernism is a 'cohesive aggregate' with 'principles of systematic organisation' and can be understood as a 'totality' or 'system'. Furthermore, Bauman's ideas are sometimes underpinned by a Marxist-style functionalism. One pertinent example of this is Bauman's argument that capitalism's 'needs' are the driving force for the changes to postmodernity. This is all quite surprising in that it had seemed that one of Bauman's main points of departure from the sociological tradition was a rejection of these systemic notions. However, these

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<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, Bauman gestures in this radical direction (Bauman, 1992: 24, 95), but his substantive claims typically demonstrate that he is not committed to such a position.

<sup>14</sup> I would question whether these problems are in fact resolvable. Philosophically speaking the debate about particulars and universals has a long and inconclusive history. Consequently, it seems illegitimate for authors to rule out universalising claims in an *a priori* fashion, as if this debate has been conclusively resolved on the side of particulars.

concepts have been re-introduced for the purposes of constructing a sociological account of postmodernity.

Consequently, Bauman's approach ends up looking somewhat dualistic, employing modernist concepts at the meta-level but denying their use in more substantive areas. One might argue that this leads to certain inconsistencies. Take for example, Bauman's claim that the condition of postmodernity displays 'principles of systematic organisation'. Now, if we take Bauman at his word, this seems rather inexplicable. After all, although one can make arguments about systematic organization during the modern period due to the totalising powers of the modern state, this power has now waned, leaving the question of who is doing the organising. This of course does not necessarily mean that Bauman is wrong to say that postmodernity is systematically organised, but that if this is indeed the case then there may yet be life in other modernist concepts.

Consequently, in comparing the macro-oriented approach of Giddens and the compromise formulation of Bauman, I would say that Giddens' approach is preferable in that it lacks the disingenuity of Bauman's work<sup>15</sup>. Once again, although Bauman appears to have made a move towards openness and pluralism, he (somewhat covertly) relies upon closed, systemic concepts to construct an explanation. Furthermore, whereas Giddens is prepared to countenance a multi-factorial account of the social configuration of the modern period (Giddens, 1987:26-9), Bauman appears to rely on an overly reductionist account whereby capitalism is the single force behind the transformations of the postmodern era.

A further instructive comparison between these thinkers is their assessment of the normative status of sociology. As we have seen, Bauman caricatures sociology's history, implying that sociology has been uncritical of the modernising process. Conversely, Giddens offers somewhat opposed pictures of sociology's past. On the one hand, he argues that in the past sociological researchers have sometimes unquestioningly accepted the agendas set by governmental policy makers (Giddens, 1987: 47). On the other hand, Giddens suggests that sociological work has often challenged established views, and not merely reinforced them. He concludes his piece by remarking that sociologists should continue to 'disclose unpleasant truths' and if necessary 'contravene' the views of the powerful. (Giddens, 1987: 51). One might object to the incoherence of Giddens' views in this regard, but at least, compared to Bauman, he does seem to be aware of both aspects of sociology's history.

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<sup>15</sup> This disingenuity is shared by many of the theorists who encourage post-modern, specific, localised thinking and yet engage in the same sort of wide-ranging characterisations of modernity that Giddens is attempting (Lyotard and Foucault come to mind here).

Another important dimension of comparison is the success with which Giddens and Bauman have responded to the challenge to sociological authority. As we saw above Giddens introduces a 'dialogical' model in which those affected by social policy should be included in the policy process. However, although this model is inclusive, Giddens fails to challenge or defend the centrality of sociologists to the research process, and is inconsistent as to the status of knowledge produced.

Bauman responds to this challenge in two different ways. In a modernist mode, as in 'Sociological Responses to Postmodernity', Bauman argues that sociology can retain its authority by altering its conception of society, an argument he echoes elsewhere (eg Bauman, 1992: 111). However, in a more postmodern moment, Bauman argues that the ideas of sociological authority, truth and universality are monologicistic, and need to be replaced by a dialogical attitude in which there are no certainties (Bauman, 1992: 82-6).

The final aspect of these two manifestos that I would like to compare is the critical or normative slant of their accounts of the current social configuration. The contrast between these thinkers is highlighted in their differing metaphors for current social reality. For Bauman postmodernity is a stable, viable system, in no danger of being usurped. Conversely, Giddens' view of modernity is that of a juggernaut that is powerful, always partially out of control and pulled in a number of different directions by different forces (Giddens, 1990: 139). Giddens suggests that whilst it is an exhilarating ride for some, others are crushed in its path (1990: 139). Once again, Giddens appears to be the theorist who can assess the ambivalence of the current situation, and see both sides of the coin, whereas Bauman's approach appears simple-minded.

Perhaps this is a little unfair to Bauman. After all, as we saw earlier he does acknowledge that the Western condition of postmodernity may rest upon the selfishness and colonial history of the West. And yet even here, Bauman fails to make a definitive statement, only gesturing towards this as a possibility. Once again Giddens appears the more sensitive of the two theorists. Whereas Bauman merely laments the lack of global analysis that could establish the truth of his proposition, Giddens (although critical of the lack of attention by sociologists) acknowledges the work done in this area by Marxist-inspired world-systems theorists such as Wallerstein, even though he is somewhat critical of his approach (Giddens, 1987: 34).

### *Conclusion*

The central theme of this chapter has been to consider how two established, male sociological theorists have responded to the deepening of sociology's identity crisis. In particular, I have been investigating the way in which Giddens and Bauman balance precariously between sociological traditionalism and a more postmodern pluralism, and in that regard I have found their approaches to be in various ways unsatisfactory.

In this conclusion I would like to emphasise the way in which the theories offered by Giddens and Bauman exemplify the dialectic of openness and closure that I outlined in Chapter Two. That is to say, the work of both theorists contains contradictory 'moments' or impulses towards theoretical pluralism on the one hand, and towards theoretical closure on the other. With regards to theoretical openness, both thinkers have been working to break out of the closures of the sociological tradition, and move to a more pluralistic stance on the pursuit of social theory. This is evident, for example, in Giddens' commitment to interdisciplinarity, and Bauman's goal of revising the classical sociological approach to social structure. As to the production of theoretical closure, both theorists nevertheless believe that there is something truer or more valid/relevant about the sociological approach that they do not wish to cede to relativism. This residual commitment to the sociological tradition, whether in terms of its research potential and conceptual unity, or with respect to its emphasis on the systematicity of society, ties Giddens and Bauman back to those neo-traditionalist theorists that I considered in Chapter Two. Furthermore, although both thinkers are aware of the potential for earlier approaches to close off theoretical options, each has a label ('structuration theory' and 'sociology of postmodernity') which must in key ways be designed to serve as a new 'paradigm' of sociological analysis that can surmount these problems. As such, each produces a new closure, that can once again be opened up in an attempt to expand its parameters.

Although each theorist's work conforms to this general pattern, the specific advantages and disadvantages of their positions are also important. Both Bauman and Giddens move further away from traditional sociological approaches than the theorists considered in Chapter Two, locating themselves in the rather unstable space between sociology and postmodernism. The work of each theorist expresses this uncertainty in different ways. In the case of Giddens, I have suggested that he often appears to have contrary or inconsistent views on issues of sociological authority, and disciplinary consensus. When Giddens does make positive assertions, they tend to be either somewhat bland and vague (for instance, his comments about the new consensus in sociology), or lacking in a considered or careful defence (as in his comments about macro-theory). As such, the closures that his theory effects do not

seem to offer much of productive worth. Consequently, it is tempting to suggest that Giddens' synthetic ambitions are more the result of confusion and pick-and-mix eclecticism rather than careful, and systematic consideration.

Bauman, by contrast makes a stronger move to break away from a traditional framework by embracing post-modern ideas. But, unfortunately, this attempt to remain at the forefront of theory blunts Bauman's analysis by leading him to view the postmodern social configuration uncritically, and mischaracterise the history of sociology in relation to modernity. Furthermore, his attempt to get to grips with postmodernity, although striving to do away with the apparatuses of modernist theory, in fact implicitly relies upon modernist assumptions to explain the current situation. That is to say, although apparently attempting to find a more pluralistic space for sociology in the era of postmodernity, the theoretical closures that Bauman offers recall those of Therborn and Alexander considered within Chapter Two, but lack their up-front commitment to the virtues of systemic analysis. This makes Bauman's approach rather disingenuous, and unsatisfactory as a result. Consequently, it seems that both Giddens and Bauman, in their different ways, fail to successfully negotiate the tensions inherent in sociology's current position. Whilst I am aware that these problems are amongst the most taxing currently facing sociology, the lack of resolve of our foremost theorists remains striking.

Bauman and Giddens do produce theoretical work that is by no means merely 'conservative'. In spite of my fairly strong critical remarks, I would argue that, for senior figures in the discipline, their 'sociological self-images' remain to a significant degree helpfully open-minded and admirably attuned to current social conditions. However, I have also suggested that both authors are vulnerable, at key points, to feminist critique. Furthermore, for all their un-disciplined sensitivity, they are in the end engaged in a reconstruction (rather than a subversion) of the classical sociological imagination, a tradition that has been strongly critiqued by a variety of feminist theoreticians and other sociologists. In recent times, these feminist challenges have become articulated with postmodern theory, and it is to these arguments that we turn to in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

# From Social Realism to Materialist Semiotics

### *Introduction*

Feminism is the social movement that in recent times has provided the strongest challenge to sociology's established practices. This challenge has not only entailed rejection and negativism however, but has also contributed to a revitalization of sociology's critical spirit. In this chapter I will be considering the latest wave of feminist criticism of sociology, those critiques motivated by a feminist interaction with post-structuralist theory. This chapter will focus mainly upon *Undoing The Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology* by Ann Game, a manifesto statement in which she offers a theoretically high-powered critique of the discipline of sociology<sup>1</sup>. For purposes of comparison I shall also make reference to an earlier manifesto for a feminist sociology, *The Everyday World as Problematic* by Dorothy E. Smith<sup>2</sup>.

The main body of the chapter proceeds by considering Ann Game's manifesto for a new critical sociology, and comparing it to the work of Smith. In particular, I shall examine Game's challenges to radical sociology on the issues of realism, pluralism, reflexivity, and the nature of the sociological subject. The purpose of this analysis is twofold. Firstly, I will be considering whether Game mounts so devastating a critique of the sociological tradition, that even revisions and alterations cannot rehabilitate its worth. It is the contention of this chapter that this is not the case, and although Game raises important questions about sociological practices, her version of social analysis for the most part fails to demonstrate the untenability of more traditional critical theory such as Smith's. Consequently, Game's arguments can best be seen as sensitising devices rather than offering a definitive critique of current sociological practice.

Secondly, I will be considering Game's approach with respect to the wider issue of theoretical closure. I will be arguing that her work manifests interesting tensions between a commitment to the free-play of social analysis, and an attempt to demarcate a privileged space for a new form of analysis, materialist semiotics.

Before this task is embarked upon, however, I shall briefly introduce the work of Dorothy E. Smith and Ann Game. Dorothy E. Smith is one of the most high-profile feminist sociologists. Her work is strongly marked by investigations into the importance of textuality, and she was one of the first feminists to draw upon the work of Foucault. However, Smith also grounds her work strongly in Marx's theories. Smith's contributions to feminist sociology have included her insistence upon the necessity of developing a sociological approach suitable to the experiences

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<sup>1</sup> I have selected Game here over more well-surveyed exponents of a feminist post-structuralist position such as Jane Flax and Susan Hekman, because Game's critique is centrally directed towards *sociology* rather than earlier versions of feminism.

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that by selectively considering Smith's work in this way, I am not doing full justice to her important feminist critique of sociology. Nevertheless, I hope that my approach recontextualises her work in a way that expands its depth, rather than reducing it.

of women, and the development, with Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock and others, of feminist standpoint theory. It is these issues that she addresses in the work that I refer to here.

Ann Game is an Australian academic who, during the 1980s, conducted important feminist research with Rosemary Pringle on boss-secretary relations, work which theoretically speaking came from a Marxist-feminist tradition (Game, 1991: xiii, 21). The radical shift in intellectual horizons through the late 1980s and the 1990s is emphasised by the fact that it is towards this very tradition which Game's critique of sociology is directed. In particular *Undoing The Social* is an expression of the growth of interest in 'contemporary French theory' which emphasises reading, writing and other textual practices, as well as psychoanalytic perspectives, and the importance of desire as a component of knowledge (Game, 1991: x, 4). Game hopes to harness these ideas to create a new, critical sociology that is 'concerned with the immediate, the lived of everyday life and experience, and with transformations in the now' (1991: ix).

### *Undoing The Social: The Fault-lines of Sociological Discourse*

#### *Realism*

In *Undoing The Social*, Game outlines a number of reasons why sociological analyses must be transcended. Perhaps the most important of these is sociology's problematic reliance upon a realist epistemological approach to the study of society. For Game, this underlying realism locks sociology into a series of conceptual dualisms that severely limit its potential to understand social experience.

The first of these dualisms is the representation/real split central to realism, which implies a qualitative difference between certain cultural ideas which represent, correspond to, or reflect the true state of the social, and the actual state of affairs being represented (Game, 1991: 7). This distinction implies two further dualisms, those of fact/fiction and theory/fiction. That is to say, that once some cultural products are held to represent certain states of affairs, this can be used to distinguish between those texts that are true representations (fact, theory) and those that are not (fiction).

Game argues that these dualisms are evident in the sociological methodology which looks towards correspondence with the real to settle theoretical disagreements (Game, 1991: 7). Giddens' work is quoted as representative of this approach, when he states that 'theories can always be in some degree evaluated in terms of observations generated by empirical research' (Giddens, 1987, cited in Game, 1991: 7). Game

concludes that within sociology 'theories, understood as models, are modified or refuted in light of the empirical'<sup>3</sup> (Game, 1991: 7).

For Game these dualisms are inherently unsatisfactory. In opposition to sociology's realism, she states that 'There is no deep real...below the surface, there is no extra-textual ground for social analysis to cling on to.' (Game, 1991: xii). Consequently, for Game, there is no qualitative difference between fact and fiction, and she suggests that sociological texts should not be seen in terms of correspondence, but instead as 'discursive practices' (1991: 5). This latter understanding dissolves the distinction between 'factual' and 'fictional' texts because to view texts as discursive practices focuses attention on the way in which textual practices 'produce' their subjects and the effects of this production, rather than the truth or otherwise of their claims (1991: 5). Not only does this new understanding dissolve the distinction between fact and fiction, but it also suggests that knowledge is not contemplative and qualitatively different from 'the real world', instead viewing knowledge processes as actions (1991: 9, 12).

Game's arguments here are in marked contrast to those offered by Smith. For Smith, a sociology for women must recognise that 'the subject of our sociological texts exists outside them', a position that she derives from Marxist materialism (Smith, 1987: 106). Consequently, an appropriate methodology must work from the '*actual* productive activities' of individuals, which suggests that these activities are *real*, and have determinate qualities that are factual rather than fictional (Smith, 1987: 88 [emphasis added]). At one point, Smith even goes so far as to say that her method involves being 'situated outside textually mediated discourses in the actualities of our everyday lives' (Smith, 1987: 107). Such a position, having asserted the possibility of avoiding mediation, places Smith at the opposite end of the textualist/realist spectrum to Game. Perhaps a more characteristic contrast however, would be to suggest that whereas Smith is looking for ways of writing the social, 'to make it visible in sociological texts' (Smith, 1987: 106), Game rejects the idea that there is something 'out there' to be captured in discourse, instead insisting that knowledge creation is an entirely productive activity.

Game's revised conception of knowledge production raises new questions about sociological practice. It opens up the Foucauldian problematic which involves examining the nature of the underlying codes of sociology, and analysing what can and cannot be said in sociological discourse (Game, 1991: 18). From this perspective, the content of sociological analysis should not be presumed to reflect features of the world, but instead should be conceptualised as reflecting underlying

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<sup>3</sup> It is rather oversimplistic of Game to take this general point of Giddens', in which he states the importance of taking into account *some* empirical considerations, and to imply that sociology thus slavishly relies on the empirical, ignoring the philosophical or theoretical aspects of its work.

codes that determine the content of this analysis, and structure what can and cannot be seen.

Furthermore, a conception of knowledge as practice suggests that the key sociological concept of ideology is untenable, because it relies upon dichotomies such as representation/real and surface/deep, and finds its critical purchase in the truth or falsity of representations (Game, 1991: 21). More importantly though, this observation about the untenable nature of sociological realism opens up a number of further critical avenues for the deconstruction of the classical sociological approach. These criticisms are all to some extent linked to the central point that sociology's overarching realist strategy effects closure upon knowledge practices and denies reflexivity.

Before I move on to consider these arguments however, I would like to pause to consider Game's points so far. The claims that she makes here are central to the general post-structuralist criticism of earlier approaches in the social sciences. In fact, the whole post-structuralist position arguably stands or falls on the social constructionist argument that 'the real' does not have an independent presence, instead being entirely socially determined. I would argue that a preliminary investigation of this claim can cast doubt upon its validity,

The lineage of Game's argument can, in recent sociological times, be traced back to the work of Paul Hirst, in his response to Althusser's concept of ideology. Hirst is enthusiastic about Althusser's revision of the concept, and the way in which Althusser generalises its reference to denote the 'lived relations' of subjects to their 'conditions of existence' (Benton, 1984: 185). However, Hirst objects to the way in which Althusser retains a notion of false consciousness, in that for Althusser, ideological interpellation gives the subject a false impression of freedom that masks their role as a prop for the 'reproductive requirements of the system' (Benton, 1984: 185). Hirst would do away with this latter aspect, arguing that as ideology has effects, it is wrong to designate it as false. He states that this 'would be like saying a black pudding is false, or a steam roller is false' (Benton, 1984: 186). This seems to me to be the essential point of Game's argument - that all cultural products are practices that have effects, and it is thus misleading to emphasise their truth or falsity.

I believe that this argument is misguided in two respects. Firstly, it seems to involve the kind of monistic flattening (i.e. treating everything in the same way) that Game endorses when she redefines all objects as texts. After all, is it not relevant to note that ideas are different sorts of things than bricks? Or as Benton puts it in reference to Hirst's argument, 'One might usefully reflect that ideologies, though real and having effects, cannot be eaten nor driven' (Benton, 1984: 187). In other words, no matter how much certain recent strands of theory would like to see culture

going all the way down, there are indeed differences between things, that cannot be dismissed as facets of their discursive production alone.

Another objection to dissolving the representation/real split relates more closely to Game's own goals. By seeing all representation as practice, Game hopes to increase our understanding of knowledge processes and their effects. However, one might argue that these can be better understood by retaining a fact/fiction distinction. After all, might it not be the case that one way in which the resultant effects of representations vary is in relation to their truth or falsity? Take, for example, the case of governmental policy on unemployment. If a government correctly gauges that lowering the unemployment benefit will force people back into the work-force, then the result is materially different to the case of a government incorrectly gauging this factor (eg. lower unemployment vs same level of unemployment). This being so, the effect of representations may vary with relation to their truth value. Thus, a consideration of truth value seems to be a relevant consideration even within Game's own schema.

To summarise, it seems that the dualisms of representation/real and fact/fiction which Game is trying to supersede may have some value as they are. In other words, there are useful consequences of noting the differences between ideas and objects, and of determining the truth or falsehood of representations.

### *Reflexivity and Closure*

At the broadest level, Game's reflexive critique of sociological realism involves the claim that a realist approach hides the power effects generated by sociology's knowledge practices (Game, 1991: 6). That is to say that by ostensibly being interested in 'the real of the social', sociology can avoid acknowledging those forces at work in the *construction* of the real and imply that the real is being *represented*.

Game argues that radical sociology is particularly disingenuous in this respect, in that it claims to be reflexive and yet limits its reflexivity at every turn (Game, 1991: 22). She makes her argument using an example of Borges'. A map-maker might attempt to make a perfect map of England capturing every 'minute detail' in a representation. However, if this map of England was indeed complete, then 'the map should contain the map of the map...and so on to infinity' (Borges, 1970 cited in Game, 1991: 22). This is clearly an impossibility, and as a consequence the map-maker should realise that 'the whole can never be represented', as each attempt to represent it changes it in the process (Game, 1991: 22).

It is just this acknowledgment that radical sociology lacks. Approaches such as Marxism claim to know the social totality, which because of the productive aspect of knowledge, is impossible. Furthermore, in an effort to establish their reflexive

credentials, Marxists insist that all theories, including their own, be located in relation to the 'historical epoch and/or class configuration' (Game, 1991: 23). The problem with this is that instead of acknowledging that a commitment to reflexivity means admitting that the totality cannot be known, Marxists situate themselves reflexively within 'the real' (in fact their own categories) to provide an added justification for their totalising position. This feat is performed by locating Marxist knowledge in relation to class conflict, so that it is justified with the claim that it is a theory of the working class, and thus the theoretical perspective of 'the subject of history' (Game, 1991: 24). On this view, Marxism not only knows the totality, but this knowledge is guaranteed by its association with the historically privileged class. From Game's perspective, this claim to total knowledge is an impossible one, and the claim to justification involves a disingenuous use of reflexivity which forecloses alternatives, rather than opening them up.

Game's other criticism is directed towards another type of closure, that which is effected by feminist sociologists. This particular closure is formed when feminist sociologists identify themselves with the subject of their research, women, in order to authorise their research (Game, 1991: 24). For Game this is illegitimate in that it presumes an identity between the subject and object of knowledge that is impossible. In the case of feminism this strategy of authorisation involves the assumption of a unified group 'women' and as such 'fails to acknowledge questions of difference' in the production of feminist knowledges (1991: 24).

To summarise, certain strands of sociology produce illegitimate closures, and limit the reflexive awareness of practitioners. One way in which closure is produced is by arguing that through reflexively situating knowledge in 'the real' sociologists can gain complete knowledge of the totality. Closure is produced by feminist sociologists in a different way, by identifying themselves with the object of study, in an attempt to guarantee the truth of their claims.

These critiques hit home with respect to the work of Dorothy Smith, whose feminist standpoint epistemology is probably guilty of just this kind of justification. Smith argues that a sociology for women should anchor its description in 'the same complex of social relations in which the study arises, and which the text "expresses"' (Smith, 1987: 139). Consequently, she suggests that the way to achieve a true rendition of the social world is by being 'ontologically faithful', that is, by situating oneself in the 'actual practices' occurring in the world (Smith, 1987: 143). Although Smith does not go so far as to claim total knowledge of the social, the implication of her argument, as with many standpoint theories, is that the truth of feminist claims are guaranteed by the actualities of the social world from which they arise.

One problem with the kind of argument Smith makes here is that it relies on an empiricist conception in which knowledge can be guaranteed by social 'actualities' that themselves do not need to be epistemologically accounted for. As Rosemary Hennessy argues, feminist standpoint theorists 'pose "women's lives" as an empirical point of reference prior to feminism' (Hennessy, 1993: 67). John Holmwood widens the scope of this argument by pointing out that in an earlier version of the standpoint theory, the epistemological guarantee offered by Marx expired when he 'got the proletariat wrong' (Holmwood, 1995: 418). This failure casts doubt on any claims that a particular social group is 'epistemologically privileged', that is can be called upon as an extra-discursive guarantor of knowledge claims (Holmwood, 1995: 418). These arguments add further weight to Game's contention that it is illegitimate to unproblematically employ 'the real' as a guarantee of sociological knowledge.

The other important problem with feminist standpoint theories such as Smith's is, as Game points out, the tendency for these theories to group 'women' together unproblematically, and subsume their differences by placing them in a single category. I shall address this argument about 'difference' later, but for the moment I would like to point out that although Game makes an important argument here, the potential for difference to fragment social groups into their constituent parts *ad infinitum* is a difficult theoretical and political quandary.

Having argued that sociological attempts at reflexivity are misguided and disingenuous, Game suggests that a truly reflexive approach to knowledge is one that acknowledges the way in which *desire* is necessarily implicated in knowledge production. Such an approach draws upon the work of Hegel, and those who have been influenced by his thinking, such as Jacques Derrida and Helene Cixous (Game, 1991: 8-9). The most basic tenet of this line of thought is that knowledge is inherently linked to desire, a desire that is endless, and cannot be dissolved (1991: 8-9).

This desire in knowledge can take a number of different forms. Game argues that in sociology, as in other disciplines that are premised on representation, this desire is based upon mastery and the desire to have 'direct access to the world' (Game, 1991: 7). The desire for mastery is also linked to the desire for an autonomous self, that is the desire for self identity (1991: 7). It is these forms of desire which are apparent in those forms of sociological knowledge discussed earlier. For example, the desire for wholeness is evident both in the Marxist attempt to know the totality of the social, and the feminist attempt to be identical with object of study.

Game argues that the desire inherent in knowledge can be channelled in ways that avoid the sociological urge towards mastery. In particular, Game suggests that

meaning should be understood not as representation but transformation (Game, 1991: 21). On the one hand, representation requires fixity and the suspension of time in an attempt to capture the moment, a process that Game calls mirroring (1991: 21). On the other hand, seeing meaning in terms of transformation means acknowledging that one cannot stand outside of social processes to take a snapshot. This furthermore requires the realisation that there are no neutral descriptions of cultural processes, as each description is also a recontextualising force in the cultural milieu (Game, 1991: 17-19).

Game argues that the desire involved in seeing meaning as transformation is less authoritarian than that implicated in the process of representation. Furthermore focusing on transformation requires a new set of values for judging texts. As mentioned earlier, representational texts are assessed with respect to their correspondence with reality. However, once representationalism is rejected, other aspects of texts become more important, such as their openness and power to disturb. These new values are lauded because of their disruptive effect upon fixity and closure (Game, 1991: 18). As such, texts are encouraged to 'invite a further writing and a rewriting' and to provide 'disturbing pleasure' (1991: 18). Game suggests that the work of Roland Barthes is an exemplar of these new values in that it 'is seductive, [and] incites further writings' (Game, 1991: 191). For Game, Barthes work is the "'model" of cultural analysis' (1991: 191).

One clear consequence of this revised approach to knowledge and meaning, is that 'scientific' analyses can no longer hold a privileged status in the field of knowledge. An emphasis on disturbance and rewriting undermines the possibility that a particular type of knowledge such as scientific knowledge can have authority over others. As Game puts it, an emphasis upon writing as practice 'contributes to an undoing of pretensions to science, truth and knowledge' (Game, 1991: 190-1).

To summarise, Game rejects the notion of privileged sociological analyses, as they involve the desire for mastery in their attempts to represent and identify themselves with their object. Instead Game envisions a level playing field in which no texts are more authoritative than others, and the model texts are those which disturb the possibility of fixity, and facilitate transformation.

Game is undoubtedly correct to emphasise the material force of representations, and her concept of knowledge as transformation provides an interesting way of conceptualising this claim. Certainly, any sociological approach to knowledge should acknowledge the transformative or processual aspect of knowledge production. However, Game's arguments cannot be considered the last word in these debates.

As we have seen, Game marshals two different arguments in order to critique the sociological approach to representation. In her earlier arguments about Marxism and feminism, Game demonstrates, I believe conclusively, that representation of the totality is impossible. However, this does not mean, as she sometimes implies, that the idea of any representation at all is an impossible 'fantasy' (Game, 1991: 7). That kind of argument would align her with theorists such as Charles Lemert who argue that acknowledging reflexivity (in his terms, accepting 'irony') means embracing an attitude of radical doubt towards any claims about the world (Lemert, 1992: 23-4). Such a position is certainly not deducible from Game's argument, which merely entails that there is always the possibility of revision in knowledge, something that (we need to remind ourselves) echoes the basic principles of scientific thought<sup>4</sup>.

At this point Game offers her second argument, seeking to discredit the process of representation by associating it with a 'desire for mastery' on the part of knowledge producers. It strikes me that the concept of the 'desire for mastery' is very similar to the Nietzschean idea of the 'will to power', which, Nietzsche argued, underlies all truth claims. This latter conception is the basis of many of the recent post-structuralist (particularly Foucauldian) claims about knowledge, particularly the argument that truth claims serve the powerful, and that the ability to make truth claims stick is a precise correlate of power and nothing more.

What is interesting about the redeployment of Nietzsche's concept is how it has altered from its original usage. As Sabina Lovibond points out, for Nietzsche, claims to rationality and truth are the bothersome province of the weak and dispossessed (Lovibond, 1989: 16). These groups attempt to undermine the powerful and noble among them by forcing them to adhere to the rules of rationality and truth, for instance the law of non-contradiction (Lovibond, 1989: 16). Consequently, Nietzsche argues that rational thought is cowardly and feminine, a tool of the weak who cannot fight by more masculine means (Lovibond, 1989: 18-9).

The point of all this is that the modern conjunction of rationality and will to power has been significantly reworked so that it is directed at those in power. While this provokes useful questions (although they are surely similar to those inspired by Marx's thesis about the 'dominant ideology'), what is ignored in the recent context is Nietzsche's (reluctant) insight that truth may indeed be a useful tool of power for the dispossessed, and indeed may be their only tool. Consequently the negative valence of concepts such as Game's 'desire for mastery' implies too eager a desire to give up

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, for Smith, the inherent revisability of knowledge is based upon the premise that criteria can be employed to demonstrate the doubtfulness of the claims of others (Smith, 1987: 122). Consequently, it seems plausible that the process of reaching towards truth contributes to the revisability of knowledge.

the hope of representation, when claims to truth and representation may be an indispensable tool to those whom radical sociology hopes to aid.

### *The Sociological Subject*

Aside from her concerns with the dominant realist paradigm in sociology, Game also finds sociological conceptions of the subject problematic. Game argues that one of the main conceptions of the subject in sociology is the liberal humanist notion of the individual (Game, 1991: 33). That is to say that the sociological subject is 'an identity, endowed with a consciousness and frequently with rationality' (1991: 33). To Game's mind, this conception of the subject has two important difficulties.

The first problem is that conceived as such, the subject is caught within the conceptual dualisms of individual/society and agency/structure. With the individual demarcated in this way, sociology can ignore the question of the social constitution of the individual. That is, although the sociological concept of socialisation testifies to the influence of 'the social' it retains the idea of a pre-existing subject with inherent possibilities for agency (Game, 1991: 32-33). Game cites Giddens' work once again as exemplary in this regard<sup>5</sup>.

According to Game, this sociological conception of the subject is also unsatisfactory in that it suggests relations of exteriority between the individual and society, and the individual and power (1991: 33-4). Game argues that the sociological conception of power links it to social inequality, and she suggests that sociologists see power as something 'held by some groups and wielded over others' (1991: 34). For Game, this is a 'reification' of power in which 'Power stands over and against subjects' (1991: 34).

For an alternative conception of the subject and power Game turns to Foucault's work in which power is 'constitutive of the subject' (Game, 1991: 35). On this view the subject is an 'effect of systems working through the body, unconsciously' (1991: 39). As for power, this phenomena is understood as imminent within social relations and has 'no external existence' (1991: 45). Game suggests that with the subject and power understood in this way, there is no longer a qualitative split between individual and society.

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<sup>5</sup> In *Undoing The Social*, Game often uses Giddens' work as a rhetorical target for her critique of sociology. She cites Giddens as an exemplification of bad sociology on five or six separate occasions, which is particularly surprising considering the affinities between their work. Their accounts of structure and action are have interesting parallels, one example being the way in which both Giddens and Game deploy the term 'virtual' to denote the currently existing set of structured possibilities (although both would object to the solidity of the term 'structure!'). Furthermore, both have an interest in the role of time in social theory (and seem to have read the same philosophers on the subject), and both see the problem of order as a misleading question, preferring to see repeated actions in the same light as novel ones.

Once again, Smith's sociological approach appears to be open to Game's critique. Smith's work certainly seems to reproduce the dualism that Game rejects. On the individual/agentive side of the dichotomy, Smith argues that one of the most important tasks for a sociology for women is to preserve the active subject within sociological analyses (Smith, 1987: 117, 142). On the society/structure side, she argues that the social world is 'shaped and determined by relations that extend beyond' individual subjects (1987: 121). Smith thus reproduces the two sides of this polarity (in a manner that is surprisingly similar to Giddens' approach). Furthermore, one could argue that by emphasising the importance of recognising agency, Smith does not theorise the individual as fully historically constructed. However, the power of these critiques is undermined when one further investigates Game's own conception of the subject.

In the first place, it is worth noting that an awareness of the individual/society dualism does not begin with post-structuralist theory. As John Holmwood and Alexander Stewart note in their survey of this problem, there have been, historically speaking, a great many social thinkers dissatisfied with the frame of reference provided by the individual/society dilemma (Holmwood & Stewart, 1991: x). Or as Zygmunt Bauman comments:

the history of sociology thus far has been a graveyard of failed attempts to overcome theoretically the practical contradiction of the human condition: the contradiction between people making history (society, system, structure etc.) and history (society, system structure etc.) making people (Bauman, 1989: 36).

These points should not lead us to rule out Game's attempt *a priori*, but it does draw attention to the difficulties inherent in such a project.

Nevertheless, I would argue that Game's approach to the subject does in fact reproduce the polarities that she hopes to discard. On the society/structural side of the coin, Game adheres to Foucault's anti-humanist perspective in which the subject is understood as an effect of cultural systems. This part of Game's formulation appears to reduce the subject to an epiphenomenon with no causal force of its own. However, this 'structural' analysis is balanced by Game's contention that the bodily unconscious potentially evades these determinations and provides a site of cultural resistance and the possibility of transformation. This part of Game's analysis fulfils the individual/agency side of the dualism.

Game's approach can be contextualised by reference to the work of Kate Soper in her book *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*. Soper notes that the recent anti-humanist turn in French theory (as exemplified by the 'New philosophers' and Michel Foucault) tends to conceptualise society as a cultural order eternally pitched against

natural desire and spontaneity<sup>6</sup> (Soper, 1986: 152). It is clear that these are precisely the terms of Game's analysis, and furthermore that these terms reproduce the individual/society dualism. That is to say, the society side of this polarity is represented by the cultural order, and the individual side by natural desire and spontaneity, representative of the bodily unconscious. The difference between the sociological approach and Game's is that in her work the subject's 'soul of revolt' has shifted from the sociological conception that agency is produced by conscious knowledge, to the post-structuralist concept of resistance through the bodily unconscious. It would seem, then, that there is little to choose between the approach offered by Smith, and that offered by Game, in terms of reification. That is to say that both retain a subject that has innate and trans-historical possibilities of resistance<sup>7</sup>. This undermines Game's claim to have developed a non-reified notion of the subject more advanced than that of sociology.

A further critique of Game's conception of the subject can be derived from Pauline Johnson's excellent work on 'romantic feminism' (Johnson, 1994: 59). Johnson argues that much contemporary feminist theory draws its ideal of selfhood from nineteenth century romantic themes. This romantic ideal of selfhood is one in which any ascribed social role is seen as a 'violation of the diverse possibilities of the self' (Johnson, 1994: 51). According to Johnson, contemporary feminism has deployed this idea 'to forge a type of feminist anti-role which seeks to evoke only an attitude of non-compliance with all ascribed descriptions of the feminine' (Johnson, 1994: 61). It is clear that Game shares this attitude in her strongly voiced approval for Foucault's argument that critique should 'attack that which separates the individual, forces him back on himself, tying him to an identity' (Game, 1991: 44). Game suggests a strategy which involves not attempting to 'discover what we are' but instead refusing 'what we are made' (Game, 1991: 44).

For Johnson, the romantic-derived strategies of anti-Enlightenment feminism are of questionable value. In particular, she argues that only a particular kind of subject can resist in the fashion advocated by romantic feminists. After all, suggests Johnson, who could maintain a 'playful parodic attitude' to 'cultural descriptions of her identity' (as Judith Butler (1990) advocates) or refuse 'to communicate anything about her needs' (as advocated by Luce Irigaray (1981)), except a privileged, distanced, and historically masculine subjectivity (Johnson, 1994: 63)? It is easy to see the parallels here between the views of Butler and Irigaray, and Game's own

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<sup>6</sup> The post-structuralist viewpoint is also usefully situated in the work of Habermas who argues that this approach constitutes an 'aesthetic critique of modernity' in which the aesthetic values of transgression and play are emphasised (Wolin, in Habermas, 1989: xxiii).

<sup>7</sup> Soper notes that this type of criticism is levelled against Foucault by Derrida, who argues that Foucault's work retains a 'present' subject that should be deconstructed into the play of 'differences' and their alternation' (Soper, 1986: 141).

contention that subjects should refuse their own construction. Consequently, in the post-structuralist feminist model, we find that the 'anti-role' which is supposed to resist from outside of cultural determinations, involves in fact a particular, privileged subject, that can hardly serve as a useful general model for the social subject.

The final problem with Game's conception of the subject is a result of her desire to retain a critical approach to subjectivity. As we have seen, Game wishes to emphasise openness and disruption, and she approvingly cites Foucault's goal of disrupting forms of individualisation mobilised by the state (Game, 1991: 44). Another way to put this is to suggest that Game wishes to disrupt power-knowledge complexes (such as those generated by sociology) in which subjects are entangled.

However, as Soper points out, there seem to be no grounds to criticise a power-knowledge complex unless it is somehow imposed upon or external to subjects (Soper, 1986: 138-9). This is a possibility that Game explicitly rejects in her contention that cultural forces are the same sort of things as individuals, there being no qualitative difference or relations of externality between the two. As such, there is no outside from which to critique particular cultural systems - these systems just are. Consequently, we find that the attempt to transcend the individual/society dualism has resulted in a loss of critical purchase in Game's work.

In conclusion, I have offered three reasons why Game's post-structuralist conception of the subject does not supersede that of sociology. Firstly, her ideal of the social subject as one that resists any cultural determinations offers a model of subjectivity which untenably deploys a privileged romantic notion of selfhood. Secondly, by attempting to dissolve the difference between the individual and society, Game removes the basis for the critique of particular cultural systems. Thirdly, her attempt to surpass the dualism of individual/society is not successful, instead reproducing this dualism in another form.

Overall, I would argue that there are two possible responses to the post-structuralist critique of, but failure to surpass, the individual/society dualism. One could advocate, as do Holmwood and Stewart, the radical reconstruction of sociology's analytical categories. Attractive though this possibility is, given the failure of such attempts in the past, there seems little reason to believe that such a reconstruction can be achieved. A more plausible possibility is for sociology to acknowledge, as Perry Anderson suggests, that agency and structure are always in play (a metaphysical point) but vary in their relative strength at different historical moments (a sociological point) (Anderson, 1990: 151-2).

### *Social Change*

Game continues her critique by questioning the sociological account of social change. She argues that within sociological discourse, social change is perceived to come about through human agency (Game, 1991: 32-3). This agency is supposed, by sociologists, to be produced when groups become aware of their social and structural location, and one of sociology's goals is to bring about this realization (Game, 1991: 33).

For Game this conception of social change mistakenly privileges conscious activity. Game states that 'quite contrary to the sociological view of social change, the 'source' of change is the unconscious' (Game, 1991: 17). Furthermore it is the bodily unconscious that should be seen as the 'site of transformation' (Game, 1991: 36). Game formulates this position using the work of Freud and Foucault, within whose theories the unconscious and the body respectively subvert the 'cultural order' and 'potentially exceed...the power of discourse'<sup>8</sup> (Game, 1991: 17, 36).

In Game's work, the concept of 'transformation' supersedes that of social change because the latter stands in binary opposition to social order (Game, 1991: 187). As an alternative, transformation is preferable in that it represents the fact that there is no such thing as social order. Instead, change is the 'essence of life' (Game, 1991: 187). On this view there are no precise repetitions of social practices in the 'movement from virtual to actual', because repetitions are characterised by 'the principle of difference' (1991: 187).

The concept of transformation is politically appealing to Game because it suggests that the possibility of change is inherent in every cultural practice (Game, 1991: 188). In a post-structuralist fashion, Game accepts that such transformations are necessarily partial, and she argues that there is no 'final moment of truth and total transformation' (1991: 189). Nevertheless, the possibility of 'rewriting ourselves' and 'writing the body' in the 'here and now' is an important one (1991: 189).

In summary, Game argues that the sociological notion of social change reifies social order, and presumes a social agent that achieves change through consciousness and rationality. On the other hand, Game's conception of change is that of transformation, in which change is a part of every social practice.

Game's arguments about change and social order direct us to an interesting feature of sociological argumentation. I would suggest, however, that Game has not quite captured the resonance that the trope of 'change' contains within sociological discourse. Particularly in the case of radical sociology, the idea that change is opposed to social order is based upon a certain strategic viewpoint. From this

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<sup>8</sup> Game acknowledges that the connections between the body and the unconscious are made by Irigaray in her work on the potential for the body to disrupt order (Game, 1991: 64).

position, the present order, or some aspect of it, has a persistent negative feature that the radical sociologist hopes to change, to improve the lives of a certain group of people. To take an example from Dorothy Smith's work, she argues that, historically, men have controlled the means of cultural production, which has allowed them to 'effectively control the social process of consciousness' (Smith, 1987: 54-5). When it is discovered that sociology is complicit in this masculine domination, the goal is a critique that will change sociology for the better (Smith, 1987: 61-2). Consequently, change in radical sociology is often associated with an improvement of social circumstances, and social order is associated with a continuation of unequitable or unfair social practices.

When the tropes of 'change' and 'social order' are explicated in this fashion, Game's own approach does not seem to be a great deal different to those of sociology. After all, although she argues that 'transformation' is inherent in cultural systems, Game uses this notion to argue that there are possibilities for transforming and rewriting oneself. Once again, as with the radical sociological approach, what is important is a particular type of change. That is to say, it is not just the everyday transformations inherent in cultural systems that are important, but particular, privileged transformations of oneself. As a consequence, Game's critique loses some of its force.

Aside from this similarity with radical sociology, Game's conception of social change as transformation is not without its difficulties. She claims that viewing transformation as inherent in every cultural practice opens up the possibilities for change in the now. However, Game's model of the subject suggests that conscious awareness and activity is not the material of which social change is made. As such, the question remains, why is Game telling us this? If the subject really is a product of an interaction between cultural systems and spontaneous bodily revolt, what part does the sort of conscious awareness delivered to us by reading books have to play? Kate Soper makes this point when she suggests that if post-structuralist theorists wish subjects to 'give up the appeal to consciousness', we subjects will do so 'when you find means to address your request to our unconscious' (Soper, 1986: 136). Or to put it another way, there is no point in teaching a stone the laws of physics because whether it knows them or not, its existence is determined by these laws. To summarise, Game's model of the subject as produced through conflicting cultural and natural forces undermines the rhetoric that she uses to establish the possibility of cultural transformation.

### *Methodology of Multiplicity*

In a final line of criticism directed towards sociology, Game suggests that sociological analyses are repressive of difference. According to Game, sociology does this in two ways. The first, and more specific of these repressive methods is inherent in the sociological approach to conflict. Even when sociology recognises the differences between groups that cause conflict in society, these conflicts are typically negated by reference to a wider unity (Game, 1991: 24). To use Game's example, even though Marxism recognises the conflicts between classes, these conflicts are seen as the basis for a wider unity of the whole, that is the social totality (1991: 24). As such, the difference is subsumed back into the order of the same.

The more general method through which sociology represses heterogeneity is in its choice of objects. Game contends that sociology privileges sites such as the family, workplace and state, and views them as particularly important or determinant of the social (Game, 1991: 25-6). In doing so, sociology presumes a 'singular logic of society as a whole' that 'lies beneath...the surface' (1991: 26).

Against these sociological approaches, Game juxtaposes her own 'methodology of multiplicity'. In direct opposition to the sociological method, Game favours the approach of theorists such as Frisby (following Simmel) and Benjamin, who focus upon 'the "trivial" of everyday life experiences' as well as 'heterogeneous objects' (Game, 1991: 25). This latter approach avoids making assumptions about which objects are more determinant, or causally important (1991: 26). These views are attractive to Game because she sees the social as 'a multiplicity of orders that are not reducible to one another' (1991: 187).

A further consequence of this pluralistic view is the acceptance of a multiplicity of interpretations of cultural phenomena. As Game argues 'any specific instance can be read in relation to a number of stories, without being reduced to a single story' (Game, 1991: 190). Furthermore, in the process of cultural conversation there is a dialogue, and the opportunity to rewrite the 'narratives of the culture' (1991: 190). This viewpoint happily matches Game's concern for the openness of cultural texts and the deconstruction of any hierarchy of truth that would privilege scientific analyses (Game, 1991: 191).

Game's arguments about multiplicity are certainly provocative, but are not without their problems. Two questions arise from her arguments, relating to ontology and politics. Game argues that 'the social' consists of multiple orders which are irreducible to any one order, emphasising the importance of acknowledging the difference and plurality of social objects. However, the question remains, what is the status of this difference? To put it another way, is it the case that the state of difference and plurality is an ontological one which has been discovered by post-

structuralist theory? Such a claim would require a certain dose of representationalism and realism, and so it is not surprising that Game rejects this alternative.

Instead, Game argues that 'it is not as if the multiple has any prior existence' (Game, 1991: 187). She goes on to suggest that the multiple is 'constituted, albeit in repression, in the constitution of the same' (1991: 187). As such, the singular and multiple orders are dependent upon and productive of each other. This is all well and good, but if this is indeed the case, surely Game (and other post-structuralists) are wrong to use the critical language of 'repression' to describe the effects of a singular order. After all, these terms imply that some pre-existing state of affairs is being constrained by singularity. If there is indeed no prior reality, how can one speak of repression? And if one cannot speak of repression, then this removes the grounds for criticising, in a wholesale fashion, the idea of a singular order. That is to say, plurality, as such, is no better or worse, *a priori*, than singularity. It is interesting to note that Game seems to realise the paradoxical nature of her claims on this issue (Game, 1991: 188), but she does not strive to resolve the paradox.

Aside from these ontological questions, there are important political implications of allowing difference to hold sway in social analysis. Susan Bordo, in her article entitled "'Material Girl": The Effacements of Postmodern Culture', critiques the postmodern tendency to let 'endless *differences* reign', a situation in which 'no items are assigned any more importance or centrality than any others' (Bordo, 1993: 275). The central point here is that the 'spectacle of difference defeats the ability to sustain coherent political critique' (Bordo, 1993: 275). In other words, if no state of affairs is considered any more politically relevant or important than any other, then any critique of inequality or marginalization is undermined.

This difficulty is illuminated by Game's suggestion that there are a multiplicity of social worlds or orders that cannot be captured in one 'story' about the social world. Dorothy Smith addresses such an argument when she objects to Sandra Harding's postmodernist suggestion that we give up telling 'one true story' because such claims can only be underwritten by 'social privilege and power' (Smith, 1987: 121). For Smith, the importance of producing a politically useful 'map' of the world means that questions of accuracy and validity are still highly relevant (Smith, 1987: 122). Or as Johnson puts it, to admit the existence of multiple, incommensurable worlds, involves ceding

one of the most crucial demands for a feminist politics whose call for social justice requires some capacity to reflect upon the ways in which difference in modern societies is constructed as disadvantage and inequality (Johnson, 1994: 123).

From these arguments we can see that a methodology that emphasises difference and multiplicity over all else is politically disempowering for a critical sociology.

Before concluding this section, I would like to digress briefly to consider the conflicts and contradictions that have emerged out of feminism's political situation and the dominant philosophical position (post-structuralism) of the past decade. As is well documented, the development of the feminist movement has resulted in a pluralisation of its goals, as the divergent groups constituting it (heterosexual women, lesbian women, western women, and women of colour among them) have asserted their different identities and ideals. In response to these demands, feminist theory has turned to post-structuralist philosophy, whose emphasis upon 'difference' seemed to make it the most appropriate philosophical basis for negotiating the present situation. However, as we can see in Game's work, although the notion of 'difference' has its advantages, there are profound difficulties in deploying it in a politically empowering way. In one sense, Game is more honest than other feminist post-structuralists, in that she bites the bullet and accepts the notion of 'difference' in its fullest sense.

Quite understandably, some feminist post-structuralists try to have it both ways by attempting to create a sociologised notion of 'difference' in which 'difference' is accepted, but is specified in relation to particular social *groups* rather than as a general condition of the social world or of individual uniqueness (the existentialist view). While this is politically attractive, it is theoretically inconsistent, in that if one accepts that difference holds sway, then the sociological categories of gender, class and ethnicity (among others) are just a few of the set of possible and equally (in)valid generalisations about the world. That is to say, why emphasise *those* differences rather than height, preference for chocolate cake, hairiness, or a multitude of others. To defend the sociological categories as particularly relevant once again implies that there are determinant features of the world that are more important than others, and can be demonstrated to be so, undermining the basis of claims to 'difference' in the first place.

### *Game's Project : Realism vs Deconstruction*

Having considered a number of Game's specific criticisms of sociology, it is worth trying to establish the wider character of her project. Unfortunately, Game herself is not very clear on this matter. Whilst she claims to be rejecting refutation as a method of analysis (Game, 1991: 3-4), much of her book concerns itself with showing the deficiencies or errors in traditional sociological approaches. Within the deconstructive framework that Game clearly favours (1991: 3-4), one might legitimately argue that what is being performed here is a levelling of authoritarian,

closed discourse in an attempt to bring about openness and free-play. There is certainly some evidence for this interpretation, as in Game's espousal of a methodology of multiplicity, her rejection of truth claims, and her statement that she supports the 'dispersion of disciplines' (Game, 1991: 4). If this is indeed the case, then Game is rejecting the project of closed social analysis, and eschewing the paradigmatic logic that attempts to draw boundaries around types of analysis in order to privilege certain approaches.

However, Game seems to be involved in some strenuous boundary drawing of her own. This is most obvious in her deployment of a new term 'materialist semiotics' to describe her approach. Game states that the development of a materialist semiotics is a 'positive project' (Game, 1991: 36), and a third of her book is devoted towards this goal. This new approach has an ontology of fundamental entities which includes the text, the body, the unconscious, desire, and power. As we have seen, Game argues that the use of the text as an object should replace other social scientific approaches, that social change should be explained with reference to the bodily unconscious, and that desire is a fundamental component of knowledge. It is clear that these are all positive claims that form the basic concepts of a new system of analysis.

The question remains, however, how this new system fits within a deconstructive framework which insists on openness and heterogeneity? After all, Game appears to be returning to a position that offers a 'paradigmatic' closure, privileging particular objects and sites of analysis, which is something that she explicitly criticises sociology for doing (Game, 1991: 25-6). She seems to be caught between offering a counter-paradigm that usurps the approach of sociology, and suggesting that the field of play should be open, a situation in which materialist semiotics and sociology would be just two approaches among many, none of which can be considered cognitively privileged. Once again, the dialectic of openness and closure is at work here. Game attempts to open up the field of analysis from previous closures using a deconstructive approach, but by offering positive guidelines for the future of social analysis, she moves to create closure once again.

This kind of tension manifests itself in another way in Game's approach, in the problem of realism versus relativism. Game clearly intends her project to demonstrate the untenable nature of realism and to instantiate a relativism like that described by Stephan Fuchs in which knowledge is a 'contingent and selective social construct' (Fuchs, 1992: 153). Such a relativistic approach to knowledge is also 'pluralistic and antihierarchical' rejecting the notion of 'safe foundations' of knowledge (Fuchs, 1992: 154).

However, Game herself covertly retains a certain minimal realism, something that one suspects is a necessary part of any discourse which is not to be utterly irrelevant. This realism is clearly apparent in two different areas of Game's work.

The first of these areas links back to my earlier comments about Game's approach. In that Game has a new ontology about the relevance of desire, the unconscious and the body to social analysis, she is clearly making realist claims about the nature of the constituent elements of society. In other words she intends that her theoretical terms in some way mirror or represent the constituent elements of society. Game even quite explicitly undermines her contention that all 'stories' about society are equally valid. She does this when she states that 'the choice of "theorists" is not random', continuing that 'Hegel and Freud are regarded as particularly important...for what they tell us about the nature of Western culture and thought' (Game, 1991: 191). This claim suggests that Hegelian and Freudian theories more correctly represent Western culture than other theories. As such, Game implies that her claims can be understood in realist terms.

There is also a more subtle strand of realism in Game's work, of a type identified by Fuchs in reference to work in the area of the sociology of scientific knowledge. Fuchs argues that deconstructive discourse frames its analysis as a rejection of realism, that is a rejection of a mode which operates by testing its discursive claims against the real. Instead deconstructive criticism focuses its analysis upon the actual textual practices and how they produce their object (Fuchs, 1992: 154-5). However, this style of argument merely pushes the problem of representation back to a meta-level, leaving the question of how deconstructionists can unproblematically 'refer' to sociological discourse as if it was just a thing to be apprehended (Fuchs, 1992: 154-5). This problem is compounded in Game's case when she argues that every object should be considered a text that can be read in any number of ways. If this is indeed the case, then deconstructionists such as Game illegitimately (by their own standards) imply that they are apprehending sociological discourse *as it is* rather than just making one possible reading among many. After all, much of Game's critical purchase relies on her correctly capturing what sociological discourse is about, and suggesting an alternative.

This re-emergence of the real in Game's work can be interpreted in two ways. It could be argued that it represents the fact that realism is a pervasive and far-reaching influence in our culture which is very hard to escape, even when you are an enlightened deconstructionist. Alternatively it could be that some form of realism is required to say anything about the world, and if a discourse is not doing this then it will have 'a hard time being taken seriously and defending itself against the charming alternatives of silence and music' (Fuchs, 1992: 158).

This latter possibility, it should be noted, does not deny the importance of Game's critique of knowledge practices (even if this critique itself requires some realism). Certainly, in the era after the emergence of the new social movements it is important to consider the practical effects and impact of theorising upon the world. However, it is crucial to recognise that this contention is not incompatible with realism, and neither is a fairly large degree of relativism.

### *Metatheory and Openness*

The last comments that I would make about Game's approach are the most general ones, which relate to her project as a whole. One of Game's key emphases throughout *Undoing The Social* is the importance of the openness of texts, stories and analyses to avoid excluding the voices of others and suppressing difference (eg Game, 1991: 28-32). As such, one might expect that Game would strive for a certain level of accessibility and openness in her own writing. This is not the case.

*Undoing the Social* is surely one of the most difficult, theoretically obscure sociological texts to be released in recent years. For one thing Game's writing style is extremely objectivistic and distanced, an attribute she shares with many of her hyper-theoretical counterparts (such as Foucault and Habermas). It is hard to see how the univocal, exclusive style of Game's pronouncements can be reconciled with her goal of openness, specificity and disruption. That it is not to say that Game does not actually attempt to locate herself in the text by identifying the tradition of thought in which she has developed (Game, 1991: 21). It is rather that her style of writing undermines the ambitions of situatedness and openness that Game espouses.

The other aspect that contributes to Game's obscurity is the actual theorists with which she is dealing. Game works at a very detailed level of analysis that draws upon esoteric varieties of philosophy, psychoanalysis, French feminism and post-structuralist theory. The range and depth of debates in which she engages are extremely broad, and the result is a highly informed, intelligent philosophical analysis.

Whatever the advantages of this depth however, Game's analysis is undeniably exclusive, and is so abstract and complex that many sociologists are likely to find it incomprehensible, leaving an audience of those few among us who have nothing better to do than engage in abstract philosophising. This of course does not mean that Game's analysis is irrelevant or unimportant. It is rather that Game is once again caught in a paradox. If her contribution to social analysis is indeed a worthy one, it demonstrates that the most esoteric and exclusionary traditions of thought may indeed be extremely valuable for social analysis. And yet Game's thesis is that openness and multivocality are the standards by which social thought should be measured.

### *Conclusion*

*Undoing The Social* is an important work of social analysis. To conclude this chapter I would like to reconsider its relevance to the wider themes of this thesis. Firstly, it represents the search for alternatives to more 'orthodox' radical sociologies, a search that has led to the introduction into social analysis of ideas from French philosophy. I have argued that although these ideas are interesting, and have potential for development, their criticisms of existing sociological approaches can best be seen as sensitising the sociological practitioner, rather than convincingly rejecting the sociological approach altogether. Nevertheless, Game's work marks a substantial critique of sociology, one which, unlike those offered by Giddens and Bauman, is sourced primarily outside of the sociological tradition. From the tough-minded framework of materialist semiotics, the future identity of sociology is not as a revised tradition for new social conditions, but no tradition at all.

Secondly, Game's analysis conforms to what I have earlier termed the 'dialectic of openness and closure', and exhibits an interesting tension between the development of a new 'paradigm' that will replace sociology's outmoded ways, and the attempt to reject such closed notions, and open the field of social analysis to all comers. Despite her good intentions to achieve the latter, Game still seems to retain the old-style radical belief that there is some particular social theory that can lead us from the present to an improved future. For her this theory can be derived from French philosophy, but whatever the source of such ideas, the key factor is a residual commitment to developing *the* theory that will solve humanity's problems, and a strongly progressivist sense that a better future needs to be urgently contributed to by radical intellectuals.

In the next, and final chapter, I shall be considering the pragmatist perspective on social theory, an approach that is explicitly committed to renouncing the old fashioned belief that truth is the key to humanity's problems. I shall be examining pragmatist philosophy to consider whether it offers a route out of the dialectical swings of openness and closure that have characterised the manifestos considered in this thesis, and assessing whether it is the logical termination clause for such attempts to define sociology's subject matter.

## Chapter 5

Conclusions: Pragmatism  
and Sociology - An Identity  
Dispersed?

### *Introduction*

This thesis has been guided by the central question: after the demise of structural functionalism, what kind of spaces have been delineated for sociological theory to operate within? To answer this question, I have been examining a number of manifesto statements issued during the crisis of sociology, and discussing the alternative identities for sociology that they offer. In particular, I have been concerned to draw attention to an underlying tension in these works that has taken different discursive forms. There is a struggle, firstly, between the desire to reach a rational consensus and grasp the totality and secondly, impulses towards pluralism, deconstruction, and the 'normality' of paradigmatic crises. In this concluding chapter, I shall be stepping back once again from the specificity of the manifestos, to consider some of the larger questions around the search for sociology's identity.

First I shall revisit Kuhn's disciplinary classification, and contrast his 'paradigmatic' viewpoint with a 'pragmatic' one. I shall discuss the manifestos in light of a key tension between these two viewpoints, arguing that this tension produces a 'dialectic of openness and closure'. I also argue that these dialectic swings might be resolved by a move to thorough-going pragmatism. Next, I shall briefly examine the recent work of Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, who offer quasi-pragmatist manifestos for social analysis, and I shall argue that their approaches in fact revealingly back away from a full-blown pragmatism. I then discuss the work of pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, suggesting that while his ideas are highly attractive and a sign of the times, those theorists with a residual commitment to any kind of old-fashioned radical sociology are bound to find them difficult to fully subscribe to. Finally, I will make some concluding comments about the relevance of these arguments to the search for sociological identities.

### *Paradigmatic or Pragmatic?*

Chapter One considered some of the meta-problems facing any construction of sociological identity and its history. Central to that chapter was the work of Thomas Kuhn, who offers a view of the history of a discipline as a series of 'paradigms'. Kuhn's work has been an important backdrop to this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, it has provided an extremely popular way of viewing sociology's condition from the 1960s through to the 1990s. In particular, the collapse of functionalism into a variety of competing alternatives for sociology's future was sometimes interpreted as part of the expected life-cycle of knowledge, a position which cast the ensuing chaos as a temporary state, to be superseded when order returned once again, in the form of a new dominant paradigm.

More broadly, the terms of Kuhn's analysis betoken a commitment to coherence, clear delineation, and monism. That is, by viewing a discipline through the lens of paradigms, one is encouraged to see coherent blocks of theory operating in isolation from one another, and to imagine that a discipline is operating at its best (most 'scientific') when its practitioners are all committed to a single paradigm.

This 'paradigmatic' position is an ideal type or pole that few theorists subscribe to wholeheartedly. However, I have argued that something of this paradigmatic logic underpins all of the manifestos offered by the authors considered in this thesis. That is to say, by attempting to constitute a space called 'sociology' (or Marxism or materialist semiotics) these authors commit to the regulative ideals of consensus, coherence, and the idea that 'sociology' (or other paradigms) can be cleanly distinguished or separated from other fields of inquiry.

The opposite pole from the 'paradigmatic' is the pragmatic. In one main meaning, pragmatism can be taken to offer a *laissez-faire* attitude to sociological identity. From a pragmatic viewpoint, sociology has no clear, coherent, or singular identity, instead being constituted by a multiplicity of intertwining strands. None of these strands have any particular distinguishing, or privileging feature - they are merely part of the broad tradition that has been delineated as sociology, and they are selected according to their particular problem-solving merits. A pragmatic approach to sociological identity suggests further that there is no point in attempting to make clear boundary demarcations. In fact, because they advocate openness in the pursuit of whatever works, pragmatists believe that 'paradigmatic' definitions of identity are generally counter-productive due to their inherently restrictive nature. From the pragmatic perspective, the very concept of paradigm suggests a fixed and inflexible mind-set.

I have argued that the general interaction between paradigmatic attempts to effect closure upon sociological identity, and the pragmatic attempts to open it up to a plurality of options, constitutes a dialectic of openness and closure. In particular, I have suggested that this dialectic operates in the manifestos of the authors considered in this thesis. The dialectic works as follows: theorists examine the work of earlier generations and note the closures that characterised their work, that is the privileging of particular methods and objects of study over others. In order to rectify such closures, these theorists make moves towards pluralism and synthesis, in an attempt to avoid the 'one-sidedness' of earlier approaches. However, when the theorists actually delineate the characteristics of their synthetic approach, they necessarily effect new closures, which can in turn be deconstructed or pragmatized by succeeding generations of thinkers.

Taking a historical perspective on the theorists considered in this thesis, I would argue that there has been an increasing emphasis upon the pragmatic, deconstructive,

and open-ended aspect of the dialectic. In Chapter Two, I considered the work of Alvin Gouldner who defined the very problematic of this thesis by throwing the identity of sociology into question. Nevertheless, I argued that his alternative conception of sociology attempted to re-establish a coherent approach for analysis termed 'reflexive sociology', and that for all its openness, Gouldner constructs this new form of inquiry as both distinctive and superior to a range of alternatives. In the remainder of that chapter, I considered two post-Gouldner manifestos for sociology, one from the mainstream tradition functionalism, and the other from its 'official opposition', Marxism. I argued that the theorists in question, Alexander and Therborn, moved away from a paradigmatic approach by taking a conventionalist approach to science, a position that threatens to pluralise the field of social analysis. However, both theorists balance this with a strong commitment to scientific objectivism, and thus produce large, systemic theories that draw strongly on the sociological tradition, and aspire to singular comprehensiveness. These commitments display a strong underlying commitment to a paradigmatic logic.

The theorists considered in Chapter Three, Giddens and Bauman, are both rather more ambivalent about the sociological tradition. Giddens' interdisciplinary moves suggest an open, pragmatic conception of sociology's identity, as does his claim to be interested in social theory and his lack of epistemological concern in general, rather than sociology in particular. Furthermore, his strongly eclectic approach to social theory suggests a pick-and-mix pragmatism rather than a rigorous, determinate identity for sociology. Similarly, Bauman finds that the modernist sociological tradition is rather too committed to coherence and structure in its underlying conception of the world, suggesting the necessity of a more open, agentic approach to analysis, and a less closed, systemic viewpoint, the latter of which has been a central plank of traditional sociology.

However, both of these theorists, somewhat inconsistently, retain a commitment to the sociological tradition. Both Giddens and Bauman argue that large-scale analysis of the sort that sociology offers, provides explanatory insight into the current state of society. Furthermore, Giddens sanctions theoretical consensus as a worthy (and perhaps necessary) goal for sociology as expounded in his structuration theory, and Bauman re-introduces the systemic concepts that he had earlier seemed to rule out, to explain the configuration of society in the postmodern epoch.

Ann Game is the only thinker so far who clearly intends to break entirely with the sociological tradition. She draws upon a feminist concern to politicise the gendered basis of academic knowledge production, and the 'malestream' characteristics of sociology seem to make it a ready target for critique and rejection. Game's attempt to deconstruct closed traditions such as sociology in favour of openness and free play,

is, however, a distinctly compromised venture. In one mode, she deploys classically pragmatist arguments which bring out the close affinity between pragmatism and deconstruction. At the same time, though, she devises a *new* approach to social analysis in the form of materialist semiotics, delineating a determinate space which would supersede that offered by more traditional sociological approaches. Furthermore, this new approach employs a number of complex and esoteric philosophical tools that definitely do not suggest a pragmatic, laissez-faire attitude.

In the manifestos of these authors, many of the tensions in their work result from being caught in the dialectic between paradigmatic and pragmatic attitudes. That is to say, that although these authors are dissatisfied, to increasing degrees, with orthodox sociology, and make moves to open up social analysis outside of its boundaries, they are not prepared to commit to the full-blown pragmatist position that no judgements about the ultimate merits of theoretical positions can be made except on local and passing problem-solving grounds. Consequently, all of the authors commit to some positive and 'grand' suggestions for social analysis. Having seen the contradictions that this leads these authors into, the question arises, why not be completely pragmatic about social analysis, and simply cast off the restrictive attempt to find a privileged space for sociology to operate in? In the next section, I shall make some brief comments about the work of three theorists whose contributions exemplify the general trend towards a pragmatic approach to social analysis.

### *Pragmatist Manifestos For Social Analysis?*

Of those committed to rejecting the closure of earlier sociological approaches, feminist theorists are amongst the foremost. This movement is often motivated by the crucial understanding that traditional sociological approaches have offered little to women in their analyses of social arrangements. In response to this lack, theorists such as Linda Nicholson have put forward pragmatist-style manifestos for social theory.

In an article entitled 'On the Postmodern Barricades: Feminism, Politics, and Theory', Nicholson argues that 'grand social theory' suffers from one central difficulty, which is that its main categories are typically indeterminate as to their meaning (Nicholson, 1992: 83). This indeterminacy results from the dual function that these categories must fulfil: the first is generality, that is the ability to encompass the whole range of human behaviour, and the second is specificity, being able to address this range of behaviour in a 'non-trivial' fashion (Nicholson, 1992: 83). As an example of this problem, Nicholson cites the Marxist concept of production which specifically refers to social activities such as 'the making of food and objects', but

which is sometimes offered by Marxists as a general concept that can explain all social activities including reproduction (1992: 84).

The attempt to generalise specific categories, argues Nicholson, is an ethnocentric one because it privileges certain concepts or conceptual frameworks, offering them as generally valid, when in fact their application is specific to a certain society, or social group (Nicholson, 1992: 84). Contrary to this view, she argues that there is no framework or paradigm that can be employed as the basis for adjudicating between disputes in interpretation. Such a paradigm, she argues, would 'invariably' be 'politically authoritarian' (Nicholson, 1992: 88). As an alternative Nicholson offers a pragmatic conception of theories in which they are valued for their usefulness from the perspective of a particular tradition, and nothing more (1992: 90). The logic of these moves is easy to follow: as the problem with previous sociological approaches is the exclusionary nature of their general claims, by insisting upon a pragmatic openness about theory, one can make sure that all claims are considered, and not ruled out in an authoritarian fashion.

Although Nicholson has critiqued generalising social theory, she suggests that one need not necessarily reject large analytical categories completely. She argues that if theorists can 'be reflective' about the possible inapplicability of a theory in a new context, and be vigilant about shifts in cultural meaning or the declining usefulness of the theory, then large categories can be an aid to theorising. Such an approach to theoretical categories should avoid essentialism, and situate theories in 'the persistence of empirically identifiable structures of social life' (1992: 90).

As I have argued above, Nicholson's take on pragmatic social theory comes from the perspective of feminism. A pragmatist-style manifesto directed more specifically towards sociology is offered by Steven Seidman in his article 'The End of Sociological Theory'. Seidman feels that sociological theory has become withdrawn from pressing social and intellectual issues, partly as a consequence of 'the quest for foundations and for a totalizing theory of society' (Seidman, 1994b: 119). To regain its social relevance, he argues, sociology should avoid making 'the increasingly absurd claim to speak the Truth, to be an epistemically privileged discourse' and instead be revitalized as *social theory*, that is a 'social narrative with a moral intent' (Seidman, 1994b: 119).

For Seidman, sociological theory is characterised by attempts to uncover 'a logic of society', and to find a single vocabulary with which to mirror the social world. Furthermore, it is primarily abstract in its mode, rejecting contextual specificity in favour of universality (Seidman, 1994b: 120-1). On the other hand, 'social theory' takes the form of narratives, is connected to current debates, and can be conceptualised as moral tales with practical significance (Seidman, 1994b: 120).

Here once again is the familiar argument that sociological theory claims epistemic privilege and is monistic in its operation, whereas the pragmatic alternative, social theory, claims no such privilege and constitutes itself as narrative.

From Seidman's point of view, sociological theory is not a lively, developing tradition. Instead of 'concentrated, productive discourse' and argument that 'exhibits sustained elaboration' there is a huge range of voices and vocabularies addressing 'a heterogeneous cluster of changing disputes' (Seidman, 1994b: 122). The consequence of this lack of consensus is that formal criteria cannot be used to settle debates, these instead being decided in relation to local and practical interests (1994b: 123). Based on this argument, Seidman reaches the same conclusion as Linda Nicholson, arguing that because local criteria are always the final arbiters, any attempt to generalise such criteria is necessarily flawed, because it projects the values from one specific context onto other incommensurable contexts (Seidman, 1994b: 123).

As an alternative to this sociological tradition, Seidman develops his own conception of 'social theory' to the point of explicitly dropping the terminology of sociological theory in favour of this vaguer (and more open) label. Unlike sociological theory, social theory should avoid universalising categories, because the level of abstraction demanded by the attempt to resolve local incommensurabilities leaves theories with little determinant content, and consequently irrelevant to everyday, local events. Seidman argues that a key problem with earlier sociological theorists is their tendency to create pictures of world development which generalised from their own, contextually specific experience (Seidman, 1994b: 128-9). Thus, maintains Seidman, instead of proposing a theory of capitalism that covered the entirety of human development, Marx should have settled for 'telling the story of capitalism...in, say, England or Italy' (Seidman, 1994b: 128-9). Nevertheless, for Seidman, 'broad social narratives' can still play an important part in social analysis (Seidman, 1994b: 130). Such narratives can 'offer redescriptions of the present that open up new ways of defining the present and the future', and 'present critical alternatives to current dominant images' (Seidman, 1994b: 130).

The second main plank of Seidman's conception of social theory is that the move away from formal and epistemological preoccupations should be balanced by a turn towards practical and moral questions. Such a turn encourages debate, in that whereas sociological discourse produced jargon that was only comprehensible to experts, practical and moral questions can be more fully engaged with by the wider population (Seidman, 1994b: 125). Consequently, Seidman suggests, the shift towards social theory is pro-democratic and encourages a 'politically engaged citizenry' (Seidman, 1994b: 125).

Seidman's emphasis upon the local, and the moral/practical relevance of analyses come together in his third recommendation for social theory - that analyses not only paint general pictures but make suggestions that are as 'specific as possible' (Seidman, 1994b: 134). Furthermore, social critics should clearly outline the social changes that they recommend, and comment on the consequences that these changes would have on individuals and wider social groups. Seidman feels that this will instil social criticism with some use value, and also make theorists accountable for their suggestions. (Seidman, 1994b: 134).

The theoretical suggestions offered by Nicholson and Seidman are certainly interesting ones. Their push for the sensitive treatment of general categories usefully reminds theorists of the potential for ethnocentric over-extension of their analyses. However, one wonders in this regard how pragmatic these theorists can be considered, as each still offers positive guidelines for general theorising that imply a careful empiricism rather than an anything-goes pragmatism<sup>1</sup>. As we have seen in Nicholson's work, she implies that by being careful, theorists can correctly distinguish the 'empirically identifiable structures of social life' (Nicholson, 1992: 90). Furthermore, she advocates narrative analysis that 'can be as lengthy and as multi-stranded as the phenomena to be analysed demand' (Nicholson, 1992: 97). A full-blown pragmatist would surely balk at the empiricist cast of claims such as these in which social phenomena 'demand' the size of analysis required. Seidman's work also seems susceptible to this point. As we saw above, he feels that Marx's analysis would have been acceptable if he had told the story of capitalism in one country, but his attempt to tell the story of human history over-reached the mark. Consequently, by correctly determining the scale of some phenomena, an appropriate analysis can be formulated.

What is curious about these approaches is the faith placed in the empirical apprehension of theorists. It is as if by freeing themselves of universalistic claims, theorists are suddenly able to see phenomena in their own light. What this ignores is that any size of analysis involves formalism and generality of some kind. Consequently 'capitalism in England' is as much a reification as 'world history' is, and even concepts such as 'context' and 'locale' imply some unifying general features of these supposedly basic units. Thus, these pragmatist approaches to social analysis, somewhat naively imply that by ridding oneself of the blinkers of general theory, social analysis becomes a (relatively) straightforward empirical matter.

One edifying feature of the work of Nicholson and Seidman is their sense of political commitment. Nicholson emphasises the importance of subscribing to the

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<sup>1</sup> McLennan notes the way in which Nicholson's approach leans towards empiricism (McLennan, 1995: 406)

'political mandates of feminist research', and she believes that pragmatism fulfils this criteria (Nicholson, 1992: 98). Similarly, Seidman's work displays frustration with abstract analyses that are unrelated to actual political issues, and he calls for precise suggestions as to the practical importance of theories<sup>2</sup>. One cannot help but agree that technical pseudo-problems have engaged much sociological theory. However, once again, the political commitment embodied by these writers seems decisively un-pragmatic.

As McLennan argues in reference to Nicholson's work, the idea of pragmatism chiming in with definite political principles is rather contradictory, as the point of pragmatism is to do away with *principles* as such, and to suggest a pluralism in which principles, in any strong sense of the word, cannot be abided (McLennan, 1995b: 407). Furthermore, Seidman's insistence that theorists should acknowledge the political aspect of their claims, and make concrete political suggestions, seems antithetical to a laissez-faire pragmatism. After all, in the latter approach all traditions are equally welcome, even those concerned with obscure technical issues, the only caveat being that no tradition should believe itself to be epistemically privileged. Consequently, Seidman's hardline insistence upon political orientation, and Nicholson's commitment to feminist political mandates leave their positions short of a fully-fledged pragmatism. This argument suggests an important reason as to why these theorists do not embrace pragmatism in its entirety. Coming from the perspective of radical social theory, their political commitments do not allow them to hold a fully pragmatic position. That is to say, the possible political consequences of such a position turn out to be too unpalatable for their critical tastes.

However, there is also a broader reason as to why neither Nicholson nor Seidman offers a completely pragmatic manifesto for sociology - there is something paradoxical about the very notion of a pragmatic manifesto. As I argued earlier, the urge to make manifesto statements basically pulls in a different direction to that of pragmatism, and so the attempt to delineate a pragmatist 'space' is somewhat contradictory. Thus, even if he replaces 'sociological theory' with 'social theory', Seidman is still offering a new cognitive (normative and privileged) theoretical framework within which analysis is urged to proceed. Perhaps these two points are related. It could be that coming from radical political positions that have a history of manifesto-type frameworks, it is hard for social theorists to move beyond these conceptual boxes. In the next section I shall be considering the work of Richard Rorty, to see if his philosophically inspired approach, and liberally-inspired sense of political engagement can transcend these difficulties.

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<sup>2</sup> Quite possibly the worst case of this in recent times has been the glut of postmodern analyses all of which vaguely gesture towards the importance of 'the local', 'heterogeneous struggles' etcetera, but offer no further concrete suggestions to help with achieving these goals.

### *Richard Rorty and Pragmatism*

Earlier in this chapter I argued that many of the tensions discovered in the manifestos considered here were the result of a contradiction between a paradigmatic attitude (attempting to carve out a privileged space for social analysis) and a pragmatist one (opening up the field to all players). In the last section, we saw that even theorists such as Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, who openly embrace pragmatism, often manoeuvre themselves into positions that limit the full force of this doctrine. I have suggested that this ambiguity is likely to haunt those who are strongly committed to a radical or left-wing politics. Consequently, there is yet to be an entirely pragmatist manifesto offered from the starting point of sociology. However, in the important work of the philosopher Richard Rorty - whose influence is apparent upon the approaches of Nicholson and Seidman, among others - we find a fully-fledged pragmatism, uncompromised by such commitments. In this section I will briefly outline some of Rorty's views, and then consider some criticisms about bringing a totally pragmatic attitude to social analysis.

Richard Rorty eloquently propounds his position in a number of works including *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1991a), and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). He argues that there is nothing productive to be gained by trying to assess claims about the world epistemologically or in relation to a transcendental conception of reason (Rorty, 1991a: 192). From a pragmatist point of view, inquirers should not understand the vocabularies that they use in terms of 'correspondence with reality', but instead they should 'say *merely* that a given vocabulary works better than another for a given purpose' (Rorty, 1991a: 193). Consequently, for Rorty, there is little point in generalising, philosophical investigations into the nature and conditions of truth (Rorty, 1991a: xiv). Rorty does not rule out such investigations *in principle*, but suggests that history shows that these explorations have not produced any interesting results (Rorty, 1991a: xiv).

A further correlate of these claims is a rejection of what Rorty terms the 'intuitive realist view' that there is something lying *underneath* the multiplicity of texts to which these texts are trying to be adequate (Rorty, 1991a: xxxvii). His contention challenges the idea that changes in vocabulary should be assessed in terms of whether they reflect major *cognitive* advances. Instead, Rorty argues that although such changes may 'produce new and better ways of talking and acting' these new vocabularies are 'just better in the sense that they come to *seem* clearly better than their predecessors' (Rorty, 1991a: xxxvii).

Having encapsulated Rorty's pragmatism in this way, the question arises as to how his ideas impact upon sociological practice. In a piece that specifically attends to this kind of problem, Rorty suggests that inquirers should reject the question of 'What

should be the method of the social sciences?' (Rorty, 1991a: 195). In place of this, he advocates an emphasis upon 'the utility of narratives and vocabularies rather than the objectivity of laws and theories' (Rorty, 1991a: 195). After all, from a pragmatist point of view, no particular vocabulary is better suited to descriptions of human beings and their affairs than any other (Rorty, 1991a: 203). Consequently, it would be a mistake to privilege certain methods of inquiry over others on the basis that they have more certain epistemological foundations, or because they more accurately describe human beings. The result of these reflections is to suggest that sociology cannot be considered a privileged field of knowledge. Instead, it should be seen as operating 'on the same footing' as other inquiries such as mathematics, literature, physics, ethics, and the arts (Rorty, 1991a: xliii). Sociologists, then, should relinquish any notion of a special niche for their own endeavours, and consign themselves to the role of multi-purpose 'cultural criticism' (Rorty, 1991a: xl).

Rorty's arguments are effortlessly presented and undoubtedly persuasive up to a point, but they need to be carefully considered before sociologists take them on board. At this point I would like to note a few objections to the pragmatism that Rorty has to offer. One of the more disturbing features of Rorty's writing is his tendency to present his arguments as a certain kind of 'common sense'. In particular, his easy rhetorical style makes it sound as if nothing could be more reasonable than the views he offers. However, I believe that this 'common sense' approach obfuscates the philosophical and political problems inherent in Rorty's position.

Firstly, I would like to address the philosophical underpinnings of Rorty's approach. As we have seen, he argues that it is strange to imagine that we could assess different viewpoints on the world in terms of cognitive value, because this would involve being able to 'step outside our language' and comparing our frameworks to the world as it actually is (Rorty, 1989: 75). Rorty implies in a number of his works that such a belief is absurd. However, Rorty's jocular assertions on this subject serve only to cloud the important point at stake here. There are complex philosophical debates around correspondence and reference that Rorty hardly does justice to by caricaturing the position of the opposition. As Bernard Williams points out, Rorty's oft-repeated thesis about reference actually conflates a number of different issues: whether we can think about the world without categorising it (obviously not); whether the world presents itself in terms that could not be challenged by further inquiry (once again, no); and whether certain methods can help us to escape the 'cell of words' and lead to more accurate descriptions of the world (quite possibly) (Williams, 1990: 23-36). By presenting the issue in such a simplified light, Rorty's commonsensical style obscures important and largely unresolved issues.

This slightly casual approach to complex problems is also evident in Rorty's sweeping assertion that 2500 years of investigation have shown that there is nothing interesting to say about the notion of truth, and consequently that there are no criteria by which language games (or paradigms) can be arbitrated. Charles Taylor, for one, takes strong issue with this claim and argues that in the history of science, paradigms such as Aristotle's have clearly been successfully refuted, and that as a consequence 'there is no looking back' (Taylor, 1990: 262). Interestingly, since it chimes in well with my underlying theme in this discussion, Taylor suggests that Rorty's attempt to redescribe the history of science in pragmatic terms is a symptom of an *a prioristic* approach in which all changes of vocabulary must conform to Rorty's pragmatic picture of history (Taylor, 1990: 263).

These philosophical arguments are relevant to this discussion of sociology for two reasons. Firstly, they suggest that there may still be some mileage in attempting to evaluate apparently hoary old notions like truth and correspondence. As a result, the notion of staking out some determinate form for sociology should not necessarily be completely rejected as either antiquated, or in all respects, impossible.

Secondly, and more broadly, one might argue that as sociologists we should be wary of allowing *philosophical* arguments (of whatever sort) to determine our practice. As I have suggested earlier in this thesis, philosophical debates have a long and complex history, and to turn to some position as if it has won a decisive victory is to ignore the inherently contestable and revisable nature of such arguments. From a sociological point of view, another serious flaw in Rorty's pragmatist approach is its articulation with liberal politics. Rorty identifies strongly as a liberal, and one gets a sense in his work that he is trying to bring liberalism out of the closet. For instance, in *Consequences of Pragmatism* he states that

there seems to be no particular reason why, after dumping Marx, we have to keep on repeating all the nasty things about bourgeois liberalism which he taught us to say (Rorty, 1991a: 207).

Fair enough, perhaps, but what if there are still good reasons to say nasty things about liberalism?

For one thing, as Jo Burrows points out, Rorty tends to imply that politics can be treated pragmatically, in relation to the 'practical consequences' of any action (Burrows, 1990: 328). However, Burrows argues that very few political issues can be identified merely 'pragmatically' because they are inevitably subject to ideological disputes (Burrows, 1990: 328). Furthermore, by implying that such issues are merely 'practical' Rorty hides their ideological aspect, substituting liberalism as the baseline of common sense. This is particularly evident in his comments about the cold-war dispute between the USA and USSR. For Rorty, 'Whether Soviet

Imperialism is a threat is a paradigm of a non-ideological, unphilosophical, straightforwardly empirical question' (Rorty, 1987: 18, 21 cited in Burrows, 1990: 329). As Burrows points out, what is mysterious here is that an apparently complex, ideologically charged issue that one might take as the apex of 'theory-ladenness' is recast by Rorty as a matter of simple empirical apprehension<sup>3</sup> (Burrows, 1990: 329).

Arguably, this is an example of a tendency mentioned earlier in connection with Nicholson and Seidman, that is the way in which a pragmatist perspective seems at times to slide into an empiricist view of the world, in which apparently 'obvious' surface manifestations are taken as written and not investigated for their underlying depths (an admittedly old-fashioned realist idea). Pragmatism can thus lead to a failure to challenge one's views and perceptions, and if imported into sociology in this way would involve giving up perhaps the nearest thing to a consensual belief over the decades - sociology's ability to generate a seriously critical consciousness.

A further problem with Rorty's pragmatic liberal approach to politics is the feeling that it holds sway by resting upon its hegemonic laurels. That is to say, that 'The liberal, being already part of a dominant status quo, can *afford* to take things lightly on the theoretical front' (Burrows, 1990: 332). This suspicion extends to the preferred mode of pragmatic liberalism - that of dialogue. As we have seen earlier, if there is to be no adjudicatory authority, then matters of dispute will have to be resolved by open dialogue. However, there is a key sociological response to be made to this contention. After all, as Marx himself pointed out, the 'free' bargaining offered by liberalism tends to hide the fact that certain individuals are in more powerful positions than others, and thus sway the outcome in their favour. As a result, the dispossessed can look forward to little from those in power except, as Burrows points out, the assurance that inequality is a necessary part of society, or the 'hypothetical consolation that eventually everything will even out if everyone just keeps "playing according to the rules"' (Burrows, 1990: 332). Those of us who are sociologically inclined are liable to feel, as does Habermas, that we should reach for the state where the sides are equal to ensure a fair outcome in the debate.

To summarise, although Rorty is a persuasive writer, the deceptively extreme pragmatism that he advocates contains a number of worrying features. I noted that he sometimes establishes his philosophical arguments by virtue of his smooth rhetorical style alone, rather than a careful examination of the issues involved. Furthermore, it seems that pragmatism can encourage complacency and empiricism rather than awareness and vigilance. Finally, the liberal political cast of pragmatism reinforces the status quo, rather than offering tools for the transformation of society.

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<sup>3</sup> Fascinatingly, although Rorty's desire to demote Truth and Philosophy leads him to refer to them with a lower case letter, in the above quotation he capitalises 'Soviet Imperialism' as if to indicate its transcendental status.

*Conclusion: Between the Pragmatic and the Paradigmatic*

This thesis has proceeded by examining a range of late modern sociological manifestos, works that have boldly attempted to identify in some way or other a privileged cognitive space for 'sociology' in the sense of a systematic theoretical overview of dominant socio-cultural forms. As we have seen, none of these self-images can be considered to have completely succeeded in this task. Each harbours its own contradictions and difficulties, and each has, inevitably, been succeeded by other, newer models. This historical perspective may lead us to the conclusion, *a la* Rorty, that the attempt to define Sociology with a capital 's' is a foolish one. From an ironic pragmatic viewpoint, one might say, 'Interesting, keep producing these new vocabularies, but don't for a moment think that you are finding the true nature of sociology, far less the "social world" as such'. Instead, these manifestos would be understood as contributions to the wider field of cultural criticism and dialogue. The acceptance of this position would decisively resolve the identity crisis of sociology, and offer a way out of the dialectic of openness and closure, but only by dissolving sociology's separate identity altogether.

I reject this strong pragmatist position. As I have argued above, pragmatism gains its force from somewhat dubious philosophical presuppositions, and can lead to a failure to challenge one's approach. Furthermore, although it contains a positive impulse towards openness and dialogue, it seems to lack the tools to bring this about constructively, leaving it perhaps as another justification for liberal hegemony. From my perspective, the dissolution of sociology into this position would be unsatisfactory and disappointing.

If sociology does not take this leap into pragmatism, then it is plausible to suggest that the dialectic of openness and closure will be a continuing feature of sociological manifestos, and self-definition. I would argue that this, in fact, is a useful process. By attempting to open-up the closures of the past, sociological theorists can introduce new, pressing issues, including those generated by the social movements of the time. Furthermore, theorists can synthesize the various approaches of the past, in order to learn from their achievements, and avoid their mistakes. As well as this, the constant process of challenging and re-examining the assumptions of the past facilitates a rejection of dogmas, and gives an acknowledgment that no manifestos can stand outside of its context as an ahistorical plan for sociology. On the other hand, by offering determinate positions, and thus creating new closures, sociologists can focus their attentions and explanatory power upon particular methods and objects. This encourages sociologists to justify their assertions theoretically rather than resorting to a careless empiricism. As such, they can avoid slipping into a pragmatist-liberal conception of society in which all approaches are equal, and the goal of 'dialogue' is

not backed up by the critical and conceptual resources that might be used to bring about its effective operation.

This perspective on the operation of sociological discourse chimes in with my arguments in Chapter One that sociology is best conceptualised as a group of intertwining and constantly developing traditions, than as a series of clearly demarcated paradigms. The fluidity of the notion of traditions emphasises the constant re-opening and revision of received ideas, in the light of new developments in other traditions and new contexts. Conversely, by offering such a unit to understand sociology's identity, I hope to retain the idea that sociology does, at least temporarily produce closures that can be categorised as such.

As to the future of sociological discourse, it is certainly the case that in recent times, the goal of creating closure around sociological approaches has, at least on the surface, become a less and less attractive one for many theorists. Does this mean that sociologists will cease to offer manifesto statements and avoid defining a cognitively privileged state from which sociology can operate? This could indeed be the case, but two factors mitigate against such a conclusion. Firstly, as McLennan has argued, there is something of a 'neo-traditionalist revival' in the area of sociological theory, a revival in which thinkers such as Nicos Mouzelis and W.G. Runciman are once again emphasising the valuable aspects of a specifically 'sociological' approach (McLennan, 1995c). If this resurgence continues, it may once again become less important to emphasise the openness of sociological approaches, and more acceptable to look for productive closures. Secondly, as I have argued above, even those sociologically-based theorists most keen to move to plurality, in fact offer new closures with their approaches. Consequently, whatever one's judgement on this matter, it seems that the habit of producing manifestos is a hard one to break.

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