

Idealism/Materialism

David F. Walsh

The controversy between idealism and materialism enters sociology because organization becomes embodied in the actions of individuals at a conscious level in terms of the motives, interests and values which these individuals espouse. The issue, then, is in what way consciousness enters into social organization and social action. In this respect idealist sociologies place consciousness at the very core of social relationships and treat them as primarily established on this basis, whilst materialist sociologies argue that social relationships have their real foundation in economic, political, technological and environmental conditions which, in turn, create the ideas, values, purposes and motivations, i.e. the consciousness, of the members of society.

IDEALISM

Idealism, which entails the philosophical argument that ideas are a central part of reality, entered into sociology primarily through the influence of the eighteenth-century philosopher Kant or major sociological theorists such as Durkheim, Simmel and Weber. What Kant did was to reject the empiricist position which argued that the world consisted simply of physical objects that were knowable exclusively by the direct sensory experience of them in the form of sense perceptions. This for Kant ignored the role which the mind of the observer necessarily played in any knowledge of reality since, as he argued, the sensory experience of reality can only be apprehended

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

and the objects of which it is composed can only be established on an empirical basis through the use of mind and its capacity to apprehend sensory experience in terms of categories such as time, space and causality. In this way mind introduces an order into sensory experiences that gives them a definite form and nature and so establishes the objective character of the phenomena that sense experience yields up. For Kant, then, mind is an essential basis for any knowledge of reality and it has its own intrinsic and categorizing nature. But Kant proceeded further to argue that the phenomenal world of facts established by the categorization of experience must be separated from the noumenal world of the human self to which the faculty of mind belongs. This noumenal world is a world of values and freedom of action in relation to them on the part of human beings in which reason becomes the basis of action, as opposed to the phenomenal world of facts which is a world of causal necessity. In this, facts and values are necessarily separate from one another: so facts cannot determine values and therefore cannot determine human life, which is a matter of values, reason and purposive action.

Taking up Kant's position, idealist sociologies argue that the social world must be distinguished then from the natural world as a subjective world of culture, consciousness and purposive action which is governed by the ideas, values and interests of its members, and sociology must understand and explain it in these terms. However, the sociological interest in culture, consciousness and purposive action, consists in showing how these have emerged historically and collectively as the common and ideational foundation for society, which allows its members to socially organize their actions and interactions with one another in terms of the common ideas, values and interests which they share with one another but on an intentional basis as agents of their own actions. Society, then, is an inter-subjective world of social interaction which is organized and structured in terms of a social consciousness which is shared by its members, and therein lies its objective constitution and existence.

But it is precisely on the issue and fact of the historical emergence and collective formation of social consciousness as the basis of the social organization of society that idealist sociology becomes problematic. That actors are conscious and purposive agents in respect to their own actions, but act socially in terms of shared ideas, values and interests that have emerged historically and been established collectively and thereby institutionalized by the society in which they live, raises the issue of how, what and why the specific ideas, values and interests in a particular society, of whose culture and consciousness they are a part, together with the modalities of action and interaction, come to be established. And here, it becomes necessary to recognize how material factors and changes – economic, political, environmental, technological, etc. – clearly play a role in situating, creating and shaping social ideas, values and interests as an emergent if not entirely determined response to them. Some idealist sociologies do recognize this but

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

argue that, ultimately, the material structures of society can only be engaged and realized organizationally and existentially in terms of consciously understood and purposive action and interaction. Idealist sociologies such as those of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology seek to take up the nature of consciousness and the social and cultural organization and enactment of social life and carry it through to an examination of how this is itself essentially productive of society and the social order of its relationships at an internal level of the social construction of the events, structures and institutions of which it is composed, rather than a matter of the social order being produced externally by material conditions of social organization. This, in turn, has led to a consideration of the central role of language in the constitution of society and the organization and structuring of social relations; and in so considering, these latter idealist sociologies, whatever their limitations, confront materialist sociologies with the need always to consider the fact that society necessarily exists in the social interaction between its members, which entails subjective and intersubjectively meaningful processes of negotiation, definition and decision-making on the part of the interactants.

But sociologies of action, meaning and the intersubjective constitution of society represent only a direct form of idealism in sociology. Indirectly idealism and the questions it raises for consciousness and culture in the organization of society enter into a variety of other sociological ways of theorizing, from those of specifically idealistic sociologies such as action theory and phenomenology even to what are primarily materialist sociologies, because they necessarily have to engage with the enactment of structure and institutions in the lives of the members of society. In this respect, many sociologies treat culture as an active ingredient in the organization of society in terms of the ways of life which develop within it. Functionalism treats culture as the mechanism by which society institutionalizes the structural adaptation of the social system to its environment. Durkheim and structuralism treat culture and consciousness as systems of symbols, knowledge and morality that are structurally constitutional of the existence of society and determinative of membership within it. Marxism addresses cultural and social consciousness in terms of ideologies which both legitimate the social structures of society and provide a major means for them to function effectively. And postmodern and poststructural sociologies enter their arguments about the nature and organization of society in terms of language, signification and discursive practices.

What the rest of this chapter will do, then, is to investigate how the idealist issues of culture, consciousness and action are taken up in sociology in relation to the materialist issues of economic, political, technological and environmental conditions of social life, to outline the various different theoretical positions which attempt to oppose or reconcile them, and to examine the strengths and weaknesses of their positions. I will argue that neither a wholly idealist nor a wholly materialist theory can adequately

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

deal with and explain the nature of society, because ultimately culture, consciousness and action have a historical and material location and situation, both structurally and institutionally: yet structures and institutions cannot be realized without purposive action which entails consciousness, meaning and understanding (Filmer et al 1972).

IDEALIST SOCIOLOGIES

Within sociology, the idealist perspective emerges first with the development of action theory, which has its major foundation in the work of Weber (Rex 1973). But Weber does not subscribe to a purely idealist position, for two reasons. Firstly, he seeks to create a science of action which not only attempts to understand the meaning of action but sets out to explain it causally, and in the latter he is introducing a positivistic dimension into his sociology. And secondly, Weber, although he rejects any form of economic determinism in relation to the nature of social action – this is his objection to Marxism – argues that ideas, values and consciousness are co-determinants of social life along with material conditions, which they do not simply reflect but conjoin with as intertwined elements in the historical processes of the development of human civilization. However, in other respects, Weber's sociology has a distinctively idealist character. For him society is grounded in the subjectively meaningful action of its members as individuals and is, therefore, a world of culture as opposed to the meaningless world of objects that comprises nature. What distinguishes human action is that it is purposive conduct, and so the beliefs, values and interests of the actor determine its nature. Action becomes social when individuals orientate their actions to one another in terms of shared beliefs, values and interests and so organize their conduct in these terms, and this is the basis of the social organization of society. Historically, the mutual orientation which is the cultural foundation of society develops and institutionalizes itself within societies to form and organize (i.e. structure) action within it in collective and typical ways in the various arenas of social existence. Material changes are crucial to this process but not the exclusive determinants of it, as culture and consciousness shape and are shaped by them. So, for example, Weber argues that modern industrial capitalism appeared in Western civilization in the form of a highly rationalized organization of economic activity that depends on the calculative use of human and material resources to produce and sell commodities on a market for profit. But this rationalism and instrumentalism which are central to capitalism depended on the emergence of a cultural sense and a mental attitude to life of the same kind, as well as on material and political changes such as the growth of trade, the development of the city and the emergence of the state, before capitalism could occur. This cultural sense

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

and mental attitude came from the religious beliefs of Calvinist Protestantism which fashioned a rational and self-disciplined life and organization of the world in a calling on the part of its members which produced the rational and instrumental ethos of capitalism. So, for Weber, ideas and values are central to the process by which the material basis of society becomes embodied in the structural and institutional organization of it (Outhwaite 1987).

Thus, for Weber, the material of society is action. It is consciously and purposively conducted by the actor, and this means it has to be understood from the inside in terms of the actor's beliefs, purposes and motives before it can be explained, and it cannot be treated as just externally determined by society. However, Weber seeks an understanding of action which is objective in order to construct a sociological science of it, which means, to him, an understanding of how it is caused at the level of purpose and motivation which can be empirically verified. His solution is to argue that the purposive nature of all action can be understood causally and explained if action is seen as being motivationally organized by the actor in terms of the ends which the actor pursues and the means which he/she selects to pursue them, and this means—ends organization is seen as taking particular forms which have been culturally, socially and institutionally established. So individual action as purposive conduct is socially tied to the socio-cultural structure of the society in which it takes place. By developing a conceptual scheme of action in these terms – using ideal types – concrete action can be empirically investigated in terms of causal hypotheses about its determination that can be verified in the light of evidence about the nature of concrete actions and the way they take place.

So Weber's position is that the members of society are actually producers of society through their actions and not just products. However, his science of action creates a problem, for his investigation of how action is socio-culturally produced by society. His ideal types of action are constructed in terms of a logic which produces a particular scientific way of understanding them, so the socio-cultural organization of action is supplanted by the positivistic, causal, scientific explanation of them. The result is that the internal organization of action at a culturally conscious and purposive level by the actor must disappear. In other words, what is central to the idealist position, namely that action has a rationale of its own at the level of ideas, beliefs, values and purposes within a cultural and social setting operating according to its own logic, is undermined by the causality of positivism (Albrow 1990).

Weber's contemporary Simmel avoids this problem in his action theory because he argues, unlike Weber, that action becomes socially organized at the level of shared orientation and meaning through culture, which typifies and makes sense of it, but on an intersubjective level, and this constitutes the basis of social interaction and not the interests or purposes of the individual. Society is their common realization and the forms it takes are

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

not a matter of individuals *per se*. Actors interact and society is produced on the basis of and through the use of these social and cultural typifications, which objectify the meaning of action for interactants so that they can establish it and their identities in cultural and social terms and organize their relationships together on this basis. So society is the myriad forms of association between its members that have been culturally generated in this way, however much it ultimately depends upon the minds of individuals to create and participate in it. Society is a matter of mutual consciousness, and the institutionalization of such, which is culture, constrains and organizes the social relationships of which society is composed and the actions within it. But the point for Simmel about social existence too, which is crucial to it, is that as individuals we are subjects as well as societal members: so our social lives carry this duality with them in the sense that our individuality stands in relationship to our sociality in our actions and shapes our human experience of the world in terms of the degree of participation in and withdrawal from the conduct of social relationships as we engage in them. Society is a matter of differential participation within it because social relationships are formed around different kinds of organizations which culturally require different types, degrees and amounts of participation in them. Sociology can really only consider the latter, but to take up the issue of the cultural nature of social life – which is the idealism in Simmel – is to recognize the rich warp and weft of the relationships and experiences that are entailed within it in terms of the relationship between the subjective lives of its individual members and the intersubjective social world in which they participate (Cohen 1968).

So, for Simmel, the major issue of the modern capitalist world (and here we can see the *rapprochement* of his ideas with postmodern sociology) is the cultural meaning of money and the forms of social interaction and social life which are produced on this basis, because it creates new relationships of freedom and dependence between the members of society as it objectifies, anonymizes and materializes their relationships and generates the covetous mind in the individual. But this leaves a problem for Simmel which a consideration of the materialist dimensions of capitalism alone can rectify, namely an analysis of the economic conditions of the emergence of money and the money economy and the effects of the organization of social relationships within modern society that the material structure of the money economy establishes in terms of things such as production, work, consumption and social inequalities.

However, action theory as it has developed in sociology has moved not to a *rapprochement* with materialism but towards a reconstruction of idealism to give it greater sociological credence. The objection to Weberian action theory in this lies in his attempt to combine the meaningful nature of the organization of the social world with a causal explanation of it on two counts. First, as I have previously argued, the causal rationality of science imposes its own structure of the meaning and understanding of action upon

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

it that is based on the logic of scientific explanation, whereas the socio-cultural organization of society and the action within it has its own logic and rationale which structure the nature of social life. Secondly, meaning and causation are irreconcilable and belong to and entail two different orders of life, namely culture and nature. To treat action which is meaningful in causal terms, in the way Weber does, requires the meaning of action to be separated from the action itself and to be treated as the antecedent conditions which produce it. But the meaning of an action is inseparable from it in this way, since an action's very nature is dependent on its articulation through the meaning which is given to it, and this articulation is a matter of how the action is described and thus established as what it is. An action is what the person who is engaged in it understands themselves to be doing and so its sense, in these terms, is in its nature, i.e. the phenomenon that it is. Immediately, then, this raises the issue of language as the vehicle of human consciousness, meaning and sense in relationship to action, and it is to a consideration of this that idealist sociologies move, not only because the organization of action at the level of sense is a product of the use of language and the rules which govern its use and so generate sense in language, but also because language is an eminently social phenomenon in itself. So the social organization of action and society in terms of the intersubjective constitution of social relationships, via culture and consciousness, can be taken up in terms of language and its constructive properties. But, in this, language is to be seen not in pictorial and correspondential terms, i.e. where the meaning of linguistic descriptions is treated as a product of the things they describe, but in reflexive terms, i.e. where language through its way of making sense and describing things actually generates and produces them as the things they are.

Symbolic interactionism does this in two ways in respect of its theory of society as a socially organized world of meaning and conscious action. Firstly, it sets out to show how society is generated and organized as a world of shared meaning. Secondly, it attempts to demonstrate how the individual becomes lodged into society and acts as a conscious agent within it through the formation of a self that is constituted in terms of incorporating the social meanings on which society and social life are based into himself or herself. But it approaches the role of consciousness and language in this not so much from the action theory of European sociology but from the American philosophical pragmatism of thinkers such as Dewey and Pierce. Pragmatism argues for a continuity between animal and human behaviour in the sense that, in both cases, it consists of an adaptive problem-solving response to the environment in which they live. But human behaviour is qualitatively transformed and distinguishable from animals, because it proceeds through the use of mind which turns human beings into conscious and sentient creatures acting on this basis and turning their environment into a symbolic universe which they engage with in terms of their understanding and not their senses. However, the social life

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

of human beings like that of other animals is a matter of interactive communication conducted at the level of mutual gesture and response between them. In human beings, communicative interaction in terms of gesture and response is conducted through mind and not instinct, which turns it into a genuine and meaningful conversation. This conversation proceeds through reading an intention into gesture as a condition of responding to it, e.g. the meaning of shaking one's fist depends on an interpretation of what is intended by it (and therefore the action which it entails) before it can be responded to (and interaction take place). So human conduct has a symbolic character.

From this it follows that what permits human beings to interact and form social relationships and society is their ability to understand one another's gestures and so bring one another's actions into alignment, and this is procured through the mutuality of shared symbols that are embodied in a common language shared by them. Language is a system of significant symbols where the meaning of words is determined by the actions for which they stand. It is the shared (and thus social) vehicle through which human beings are able to give the same meaning to one another's gestures and responses, because it permits the individual to form the same response to his or her own gesture as he or she forms to that of the other, and so to interpret and define it in the same way. Taking the role of the other then in relation to oneself is what human relationships depend on. In this way social interaction becomes possible at the level of intercommunication through language, and society is socially organized and structured on this basis. The social world is a world of symbolic interaction.

But, in these terms, social behaviour is not just a simple matter of learning to gesture and respond linguistically, because to do this requires the incorporation of the other in oneself to do it. In this the self of the individual is constructed through symbolic interaction in which the individual internalizes the other's definition of his or her behaviour and defines it in this way too. So to inhabit human society is to acquire a self as a result of its basis in symbolic interaction and this, again, distinguishes human beings from all other animals. Psychologically, within the individual, self-formation is generated in terms of a dialogue between two parts, an 'I' and a 'Me'. The 'I' is the physiological and psychological impulses that produce gestural behaviour in the individual, but the 'Me' is the response of the other as this interprets and defines what the individual builds into himself or herself to produce a similar but this time internal response. So the individual, through the development of a self, becomes a society in miniature in which the symbolic interaction of society is mirrored and reproduced in the psychological interaction of the self. And, in this, mind and symbols are the basis of both the external and the internal interaction. Indeed this psychological interaction which the individual has with himself or herself is precisely what being a human is, and it provides for the conscious inner experiences which human beings have and which,

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

unlike animals, are central to their actions, since human behaviour is largely covert and intentional rather than overt in nature. That is, human beings, because of mind, constantly consider, think and weigh up the possibilities of action in relation to their sense of society before acting, whereas animals respond instinctually to environmental stimuli. The self of the individual emerges in stages from childhood to adulthood in which the individual learns to master and incorporate the roles which others play in society by acquiring, through language, the meanings and definitions which are entailed in their performance. But more, because social life and action are a learning process of this kind, it is a never-ending thing, so individuals can and do change their selves as they enter new situations, interact with new others and acquire new social meanings.

So symbolic interactionism points to how human beings inhabit the world consciously which entails acting in a purposive fashion. But they do this socially, and it is the social and symbolic system of language that provides them with the means for organizing their actions collectively but in terms of the meaningful definition and negotiation of social situations. But what is problematic in symbolic interactionism is the lack of any materiality in its account of either the structure of society or the structure of the self. In the former this is noticeable: symbolic interactionism is unable to build up an understanding of the macro-organization of society from its micro-studies of social interaction or to show how historical, economic and political factors may be generative of the macro-circumstances within which micro-interaction takes place, e.g. the institutional official curriculum and the practice of teaching and learning that take place within the classroom. The materiality of the self is largely ignored by reducing the psyche not only to consciousness alone but to a socially framed consciousness which ignores the physiological and psychological structures of instinct, need and feeling. This is a process not of learning to internalize the other but of learning which involves a tense and conflictual process of projection, introjection, identification and rejection in the relations between the self and others. And by treating language as a system of significant symbols that constitute a fixed repertoire of meanings, even the negotiated interpretational character of life in society at the level of meaningful action becomes problematic to explain.

But it is in reference to this latter that phenomenological sociology finally comes to what must ultimately be the project of idealistic sociology, namely to show that the reality of society is socially constructed because the human social world is a world of culture, consciousness, meaning and action. Phenomenology argues that the world is experienced through consciousness, so subject and object are not separate from one another. Nor is the relationship of subject and object in consciousness a matter of the correspondence between the former and the latter, as positivism would argue; rather consciousness is intentional in the sense that it reaches out to grasp the objects of the world through experience by making that experience

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

meaningful. In this way, then, the objects of the world are understood and typified in particular ways and their concrete reality is established on that basis. But everyday consciousness grasps and experiences the world in the natural attitude and treats it as a world of objective and pre-given facts. This is the common-sense attitude of daily life and it is essentially social in character too, i.e. the natural attitude assumes that the world is shared with other human beings who see and understand it in the same way. What then goes unnoticed in the natural attitude is its intentional and reflexive nature, i.e. its role in the typification and construction and the objectivity and reality of the world and its character as an intersubjective (i.e. social) consciousness. A phenomenological sociology, then, seeks to examine how society and social reality have their foundation in the reflexive and intersubjective nature of the natural attitude as it is embodied in the common-sense knowledge which the members of a society share with one another, in terms of which they socially understand the reality of their world and organize their actions together with one another within it. It investigates how the social world, through the common-sense organization of its life, is internally structured from within as the members of society use their common-sense knowledge of social reality as the basis of and for their daily lives. But whereas the members of society see this common-sense knowledge as practical knowledge about the facts of social reality, phenomenological sociology sees it as constructing the facts of social reality through its own way of making sense of the scenes of everyday social life and action within them and thereby typifies and objectifies them as facts.

Schutz takes the lead in this to argue that whereas the action of any particular individual stems from his or her unique biographical situation and is conducted in terms of a personal project which gives it a subjective meaning to the actor, yet their biography is formed in relation to a social and historically given setting (i.e. society) which they share with others and know in common through the common-sense knowledge which society equips them with as the basis of membership in it. So the consciousness of the individual is neither solitary nor solipsistic even when action has a unique or personal meaning to him or her because it is conducted in a social world with others that is known and shared with them on a common basis. Common-sense knowledge entails a shared and social consciousness which it achieves by creating a reciprocity of perspectives between individuals – an intersubjectivity that overcomes their subjectivity. It does this by building the assumptions into itself that, firstly, if individuals were to change places with one another they would see the world in the same way as one another, and, secondly, that individuals can discount their biographies from the point of view of making the world relevant to their lives and participating in it. So common-sense knowledge creates a knowledge which is that of any person and which permits the typification of the events of the world to become a social process rather than a matter of private experience of them. And this common-sense knowledge of the world then,

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

by its very intersubjectivity and sociality, is the realm of objective meaning (i.e. culture) in terms of which society, social relationships and social life are organized (i.e. structure) and conducted (i.e. action).

Common-sense knowledge, then, takes the form of social typifications of the world and society (note the connection between Schutz and Simmel here) and it is embodied in natural language which socially organizes and distributes it throughout society. Using it, the members of society are able to interact with one another because it establishes for them what are the facts of the social world which they share together. However, since action is purposively conducted in terms of a project by the actor which motivates it, interaction between actors (the social) is dependent on the ability of them to produce an interlock of their actions. This, Schutz argues, occurs because social action is based on a reciprocity of motives in which the 'in order to' motives in terms of which actors pursue the achievement of their projects become the 'because of' motives in terms of which other actors comply with those actions by gearing their own actions to them, e.g. one actor's desire to eat becomes another actor's desire to produce a meal. But this reciprocity of motives is only possible because of the reciprocity of perspectives which common-sense knowledge entails in terms of the vocabulary of motives which is socially established by it and which allows actors to socially attribute motives to one another's actions and comply with them. Moreover, the organization of interaction on this basis is simply and only a social and practical matter of being able to accomplish the interaction, i.e. maintain a relationship, and never entails a complete understanding of one actor's action by another actor, because each individual's action has a unique and impenetrable subjective meaning which is personally located in the specific biographical situation of each individual. It is in terms of objective, i.e. social meaning of action, that the members of society interact, and this is provided by the common-sense stock of recipe knowledge which actors share as members of the same society about typical motives, typical actions, typical events and typical situations that are its nature. So this common-sense and social knowledge of reality (culture and its social consciousness) is the basis of the organization of social life and action and interaction in it.

Moreover in its use on a practical basis as the foundation of social life, common-sense knowledge has its own rationality which is precisely that and which is not the same as science, so the cultural organization of social life must be treated and explicated in its own terms and not subjected to a scientific representation and explanation of it in science's causal terms. This does not prevent the empirical investigation of the cultural organization of social life at the level of the interactional and common-sense construction and organization but it does preclude the use of the hypothetico-deductive reason of science to do it. In this investigation, ethnomethodology has established the nature of the empirical programme. Taking common-sense knowledge of the facts and events of the social world and its embodiment in

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

natural language, it investigates how the members of society draw upon this knowledge to conduct their daily lives together in terms of the socially organized ways in which they linguistically describe and account for the nature of life and social scenes of society and thus inhabit it and act within it. This knowledge they take for granted as fact and they use it in a practical and unreflexive fashion, so what remains unnoticed to them is its artful and interpretive use by them in which they are constantly negotiating and making sense of the social scenes and actions which they encounter and organizing their own actions in terms of this. So these scenes and actions are constructed as realities (the reflexivity of accounts). But this they do contextually (and here is the departure over language by phenomenological sociology from symbolic interaction) in the sense that any account of social scene or action draws upon its specificity to establish its factual reality (the indexicality of accounts). So language, as it is used, is socially organized by the members of society to make sense of their social world in terms of it, and the cultural knowledge which it embodies and establishes is constructive of social reality for its users. The members of society, then, are not dopes who know nothing about their world and their actions but culturally competent users of common-sense knowledge engaging and practising in the organization of their world through the practices in terms of which they account for and inhabit it. However they do it unreflexively and practically (i.e. in terms of the natural attitude) and so the constructed nature of social reality goes unnoticed by common-sense knowledge when it is used commonsensically.

But in addressing the production of society in terms of its intersubjective construction alone, phenomenological sociology, like all idealistic sociologies, is forced against the limits of its explanation of social life. What is missing is how the contextual nature of social situations is not simply an issue of how their objective reality is established through the negotiation and construction of them from within. They also have a historical location, a material foundation and an institutional existence which externally constrain the activities of people within them. The strength of idealistic sociology is to show that structures and institutions depend upon their articulation and enactment in practice but this takes place in the social space which, to a large extent, they circumscribe and establish. This then gives them an irreducible reality which is more than that of their intersubjective constitution and it is this reality which materialist accounts of society treat as central about its nature.

MATERIALISM

Unlike with idealism, it is not possible to define materialism in some very precise and specific way. The reason for this is that what materialist

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

sociologies treat as the material conditions and character of the social world varies from one materialist theory to another, as does the extent to which different theories treat material factors as determining of social relationships and how they take up conscious and social action and position it in relation to them. What all forms of materialism then, in the last analysis, subscribe to is more a question of rejecting idealist conceptions of social reality which insist that its nature resides exclusively in human consciousness and the organization of action and social relationships in terms of this. Instead, materialism insists on treating the existential location of society as central to the determination and organization of social life, but what constitutes its existential location and its material foundation is distinguished differently within different sociologies.

MATERIALIST SOCIOLOGIES

One major strand of materialist sociology stems from the early positivistic position of Durkheim and the proto-functionalist model of society that inheres in this and which functionalist sociology proper develops in its own right. But, within this positivistic-functionalist framework, culture too is given a formative role in relation to the material processes of the social organization of society as a basis on the level of collective beliefs, values and norms for the instantiation of its structures and institutions. Durkheim argues that society exists as a separate reality in its own right which consists of social facts. These social facts are typical ways of acting, thinking and feeling which characterize the nature of social existence, and they stem not from the nature of the individuals who engage in them but from the structure and institutions of society which externally impose themselves on its members and constrain and determine their actions and relations with one another. Moreover, because the social facts of society have these three intrinsic characteristics of typicality, externality and constraint, they have the reality of things in the same way as the facts of nature are things and so can be observed and studied empirically as objective data on the same basis. So society is a reality which has its foundation in the constitution of group life and the social solidarity this produces in its members which comes materially from the form and density of the relationships between them (the morphological basis of society) and symbolically from the common beliefs, values and norms which they share (the collective consciousness or culture of society). Materially society is organized in terms of the existential forms which social activity entails (production, reproduction, and administration, government, etc.) and the functionally determined institutional arrangements in terms of which they are socially co-ordinated and structured (kinship, gender, age, economy, polity, etc.).

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

But this material and morphological foundation of society is sustained culturally by the collective beliefs, values and norms that symbolize, regulate and organize the social relationships of which these institutional arrangements are composed. So, Durkheim argues, the morphological structure of the social division of labour creates a specialization of activities in society and relationships of functional interdependence between them which produces a society in which social relationships become relationships of exchange and contract between its members. But this new form of society can only achieve real communal and solidary existence on the basis of contract and exchange if the functional interdependence produced by the division of labour is underpinned and realized by collective beliefs and values (i.e. culture and collective consciousness) that socially regulate the contractual relationships of exchange by establishing and determining the terms and conditions of their organization. Otherwise the specialization of social activity introduced by the division of labour would fragment the structure of society and foster a completely egotistical individualism in its members. So culture and consciousness are central to Durkheim's sociology but only in terms of their relationship to and realization of the social organization of the material and morphological conditions of their existence. And this material basis to society is further clarified in his argument that what precipitates the emergence of the social division of labour as the foundation of the modern world is the destruction of segmental societies by population increase in relation to better forms of communication and transportation. This bursts through the existing institutional and primarily kinship structures of simple societies to create a conflict over environmental resources between them and their different elements which only a reorganization and restriction of their use differentially by specialized social organs on an interdependent basis can resolve. That is, the economic, the political, the religious, etc. spheres of life need to separate out from one another and organize themselves institutionally and interdependently through the use of different resources for society to survive, and this is what a society based on the social division of labour entails and what its solidarity is now based on.

What is valuable in Durkheim's position is that he shows how the culture of society (its cognitive and moral ordering in terms of a collective consciousness) is central to its institutional organization, but that any sense of the nature of culture and its role in social life must necessarily relate it to its existential location *vis-à-vis* the material and morphological conditions of society. But this is achieved at a major and problematic cost to the analysis of social life. Firstly, it entails the objectification of social structures, institutions and consciousness to the point at which their activation on an interactional level by the members of society in terms of their actual conduct remains unaddressed. Durkheim, quite rightly, shows that individuality and the development of a personal consciousness require a society based upon the division of labour in which its members can distinguish themselves from one another because structurally they occupy different

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

positions in society and engage in specialized and differentiated activities that require specific talents and abilities and make for a sense of identity. But how the members of society act in these terms is covered by a structural account of their position in the institutional organization of society and the external and constraining character of this on action and social relationships. For Durkheim, action is treated primarily as a result of social structure, rather than society being realized in terms of conscious and purposive action on the part of its members. Secondly, even at the level of the material and structural organization of society, Durkheim's examination of this and its historical formation is completely general and theoretical rather than specific and concrete. If in idealistic sociologies the micro-analysis of the intersubjective relationships between the members of society cannot address the macro-organization of the social world in which they are conducted, so, in Durkheim, the macro-analysis of structure and institutions does not address how their externality and constraint are internally organized and realized at the level of the interactional and purposive relationships between the members of society. Even though consciousness is introduced into the analysis of the organization of social life in terms of culture, it is entirely in terms of its normative and legislative nature and not in terms of its interpretive and creative uses.

Functionalism replicates these problems. In Durkheim's early work, society is conceived of as a system which is like an organism and, just like any other organism, its social organization is a product of its adaptation to the environment within which it is located. In terms of this then it becomes possible to specify what constitutes healthy or pathological states of the social organization of society in terms of whether they successfully adapt society to the conditions of its environment and thus preserve and maintain it or whether they undermine its stability and social order. Functionalism adopts this organic model of society and produces a version of the material foundations of society and its social organization in terms of the needs which these conditions pose for societal existence and which are met, and society is established and maintained through the development of its structural and institutional organization on a functional and adaptive basis *vis-à-vis* environmental conditions. The relationship between the social organization of society and the environment is both general and specific: general in the sense that the environmental conditions of society are universal, which explains the emergence of certain general structures and institutions in all societies; but specific in the sense that these conditions have localized character in their existence which explains the particular forms which these general structures and institutions take in particular societies. But although environmental conditions are real in themselves, they are not entirely material in a strict sense because they entail organizational and symbolic conditions too. Moreover, culture is the primary adaptive mechanism through which society as a system is able to generate and organize functional social and institutional structures, so the ideational

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

enters into the social organization of social life through the way that structure and culture are tied together in the processes of the adaptation of society to its environment.

Within functionalism, Parsons develops the most sophisticated position. For him, the environment of the social system consists of physical, cultural and psychological conditions which impose functional needs (functional prerequisites) which have to be resolved structurally and institutionally in order for the social system to emerge and sustain itself (i.e. in order for society to be possible). The physical environment is the reality of scarce resources which have to be utilized, organized and allocated in society as its material basis of production and reward, which requires the development of economic institutions. The cultural environment poses the reality of the need for co-operation between the members of society, which requires a common value system in terms of which common goals and means can be specified to which they can subscribe. This provides the basis for authority and the distribution of power in society (the polity) which co-ordinates the activities of societal members and organizes the production and allocation of economic and symbolic resources in it. But additionally the cultural environment poses the need for collective values to be legitimated if the political and economic system of society is to be accepted by its members, which requires religion or a secular ideology. Finally, the psychological environment is one of unsocialized individuals with biological and psychological needs who have to be socialized into acting in accordance with society's requirements, which requires agencies of socialization and primarily the family. But what makes society a system of structures and institutions is that all of these environmental conditions and the institutional structural-functional solutions to them interlock with one another and operate in tandem and, as they interlock, so structures and institutions become environments for one another too, to which they must adapt.

But Parsons's theory of the social system also moves – and this is the sophistication that distinguishes it from other functionalist theories – to a consideration of the interactional level of its organization as well as its institutional organization and connects them through the normative order. Ultimately human life entails action which is motivated and determined on the basis of need, but socially this takes place in a situation of scarce resources and other human beings in pursuit of their needs. What then is a potential situation of conflict can only be resolved from the point of view of the establishment of social order and society, as opposed to warfare and chaos, if co-operation is produced between individuals in their actions. Such is achieved through the cultural and institutional organization of action by society on a social basis in which a central value system establishes normative control over the conduct of its members at the level of rules and expectations that govern the performance of social roles within society. So society exacts conformity to its value system on the part of its members through socialization and social control but it motivates them to

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

accept it and rewards them with economic and symbolic resources which satisfy their needs on the basis of their social conformity in the performance of social roles. The actor in society becomes the social actor who organizes his or her actions in a societal rather than an individual way. So social action, the structure and institutions of society and the environment are functionally dovetailed into one another as a materially, culturally and normatively organized system.

The emphasis on environmental conditions and the functional needs of society, then, brings materialism into functionalist theory, and the cultural and normative organization of action within society is located existentially in terms of this. What is problematic, however, is the generalized conception of environmental necessity with which functionalism works, which, whilst capturing a vital sense of why certain kinds of structures and institutions may have a tendency to be universal because of their functionality, fails to examine the historical specificity of their generation and the unique forms which they take in different societies. It is not enough to localize the environment in relation to the social organization of a society; it is also necessary to address this historical interplay and conjunction of material conditions in terms of the dynamic interplay between them and emergent forms of socio-cultural consciousness as distinctive processes of change that are specific to the concrete organization of specific societies. Otherwise society is completely reified and removed from a historical and existential location in the world. But more: the culturalist element of functionalist theory which emphasizes the normative and regulative character of the institutional organization of action on the basis of common values ignores the extent to which competing values exist within society, which are tied to the interests of different groups within it on the basis of their structural location and pursued and enforced on the basis of power struggles between them. Authority has a coercive as well as a consensual role, and values are enforced as well as accepted. But at the level of interaction, the legislative nature of norms and values and the performance of social roles in terms of them are unavoidably subject to interpretation and decision-making by actors and not a matter of their programmatic instillation by society. Otherwise, why would deviance, conflict and creativity be part of social existence as well as duty, consensus and conformity?

If positivistic and functionalist sociologies develop a form of materialism, the major materialistic position in sociology is that of Marxism. Marx embraces materialism specifically as a rejection of the idealism of his mentor Hegel. Hegel argued that human life and the society in which it is organized form a world of consciousness and ideas that progressively develops in a rational direction over the course of history. Marx rejects this position for a historical materialism on the grounds that Hegel's theory robs the world of any real, objective and historical foundation. For Marx it is not social consciousness which determines social existence but the reverse, and

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

social existence has a material foundation in the social organization of production through which human beings, in terms of their labour, create the physical and concrete basis of society. In this they establish their primary social relationships with one another as relations of production which are historically determined by the form and mode which production takes, as this is shaped by the particular material forces which it utilizes and organizes. The history of society is one of the dynamic, conflictual progressive movement of society from one stage to the next as the mode of production on which it is based changes, and so societies can be distinguished in terms of the mode of production by which they are socially organized (Bottomore and Rubel 1956).

But this analysis of society in terms of this mode of production by Marx and Marxism lends itself to two competing tendencies: one is praxiological and makes action a central part of social existence, and the other is systemic and moves the materialism in the direction of economic determinism (Benton 1975). In both cases the issue revolves around the nature of the organization of production and how social existence is formed and established by it. In the systemic model Marx distinguishes between the real and material base of society, which is the forces of production and the mode of production which is organized upon them, and the legal and political superstructure of society, which is the institutions and culture of society that are generated and determined by the material base. The argument here is that the particular form of social production (e.g. agriculture, industry) entails a specific division of labour between producers which forces them into definite spheres of labour. This, then, is the genesis of their actions and social relationships with one another. As production produces a surplus, so what surfaces is a particular structure of ownership and control which is central to its organization. This transforms the relations of production into class relationships of domination and subordination between a ruling class who own the forces of production and a subordinate class who do not. So the productive system realizes itself structurally in society as class and the institutional organization of society is based on this. In turn this class structure objectively establishes the social interests and determines the social actions of the members of society, but since the class structure is a hierarchical structure of domination and subordination the interests of different classes stand in opposition to one another and the relationships between them are conflictual as they struggle to realize them. The legal, political and cultural superstructure is simply the extension of the economic mode of production and the class structure which it creates into all the other spheres of social life.

The legal and political institutions of society are the forms of administration of government through which the ruling class organizes life within it to promote its interests and preserve its control over society. The culture and social consciousness of society (i.e. its ideas and values) take the form of a dominant ideology which reflects, masks, legitimates and reproduces

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

the class relationships of society. As Marx puts it, the ruling ideas of an epoch are always the ideas of the ruling class who, through their ownership of the means of production, also own the means for the production of ideas, and these are a reflection of their own interests. But in so far as a dominant culture is established on this basis, so the ideas and values which it establishes are universalized throughout society and, by subscribing to it, the subordinate classes in society develop a false consciousness of themselves and their position and interests within it which makes them agents of and collaborators in their own subordination. However, since the system of production, through the private ownership of the forces of production, is a class system of domination and subordination, it has an inherent tendency to break down because it cannot ultimately contain the contradictions and conflicts within it that this produces and which lead to class conflict and class struggle, which become the motor of historical change through the revolutionary transformation of society. But revolution, in turn, is dependent upon the development of new forces of production which undermine the existing forces of production and the mode of production which is based upon them, and lead to the emergence of new classes who control them with the power to challenge and overthrow the existing ruling class as a result.

The capitalist system of production entails the industrial production of commodities to be sold for profit in a market. But the basis of industry is the use of labour power as the force of production which entails its commodification and sale by the labourer to produce profit. So a class structure is established in which a capitalist ruling class (the bourgeoisie) who own labour power and subordinate and exploit the workers who sell it (the proletariat). Furthermore, because the labourer loses control of his or her labour as it is commodified and utilized in the division of labour that is entailed in the industrial processes of manufacture, so the labourer is alienated from his or her own human being which lies in the capacity for creative and self-directed labour. Instead the fate of the worker is determined by the commodity which he or she produces. The whole system of capitalist production, then, is a system which is based upon the commodification of labour, and the capital which gives the bourgeoisie their ruling position in society is nothing more than the congealed fruits of the labour power of the proletariat which has been acquired through its ownership and exploitation by the bourgeois class. In capitalism, then, it is the system of production which determines life within it, and what this produces is a world of commodified, exploitative and alienated social relationships between its members. The dominant culture of capitalism ideologically legitimates this by presenting the market as the natural and necessary condition for economic production, which disguises how it is a historical and socially determined form of production that depends upon a particular organization of social relationships between producers through the sale of labour and its use for profit-based activity that dehumanizes

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

them as it commodifies them. As profit becomes the basis of production in society, so it is this and not human need around which capitalist society is organized. But, for Marx, the commodification, exploitation and alienation of labour in capitalist manufacture is inherently contradictory, as profit opposes need, and its relentless pursuit in a competitive market forces the capitalist to reduce the cost of labour by lowering wages and creating unemployment in order to secure it. Not only does this lead to a degenerative cycle of booms and slumps in production as production and consumption fail to match up, but it polarizes the class structure into a small and ruling bourgeoisie class and an ever growing and subordinate proletariat who become an increasingly pauperized majority, and their objective interests stand in opposition to one another. Finally, Marx argues, this polarized class structure and the opposition of interests that the contradictions within the capitalist productive system produce can only intensify as these contradictions necessarily deepen to the point where class conflict must break out openly, leading the proletariat to organize itself politically against the bourgeoisie and to seize control of the productive system for themselves and in terms of their own collective interests since it is based on their labour. In this revolutionary struggle, then, socialism will come to replace capitalism and human and social need will replace profit as the basis on which labour is organized to generate the productive system of society.

But it is precisely this account of the transition from capitalism to socialism through revolutionary class struggle that shows up the problematic character of a systemic Marxism, since it assumes an important and determining role for consciousness and action in class organization, class struggle and political revolution which an intransitive and deterministic model of society that constructs it in terms of base and superstructure cannot provide for. What is valuable about treating production as a system is that it shows the constraints upon action that inhere in its organizational structure. Undoubtedly capitalism is based upon the logic of profit and the market and the material generation of an economic existence for the members of capitalist society in these terms. But this, as praxiological forms of Marxism particularly as developed by Gramsci point out, does not create a social world in which relationships are simply reducible to their economic determination. If this were so then Marx's predictions about the collapse of capitalism and the triumph of socialism would have been borne out historically, whereas it is socialism that seems to have collapsed and capitalism that has survived, mainly by changing its nature from a system of production to a system of consumption in which any utilitarian conception of need as the basis of human social existence has been replaced by the cultural construction of social existence in terms of the symbolic use of commodities as the basis of styles of life and sources of identity.

In this Marxism must confront what its systemic and economistic version of labour and production tends to ignore, which is the conscious, creative

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

and purposive nature of human labour through which the social organization of production is already a cultural as well as a material phenomenon, as Weber argues. In this the superstructure of society is not generated by the economic base but, from the very beginning, plays a vital role in organizing it. It is not just that the productive system of capitalism provides a material and existential basis for social divisions in society at the level of class, but that the members of society must identify themselves consciously and collectively in these terms if social relationships in society are to be organized around this. This Marx recognizes but fails to grasp. That they are not exclusively organized in terms of class in modern society points towards other sources of social differentiation and power in society such as status, gender, ethnicity and age, which are only tangentially related to economic position in its system of production. Moreover the market position of any group in capitalist society is a highly differentiated and not a closed class situation: the possession, control and marketability of skills of certain groups prevent their complete contractual monopolization by the managers of industry. Indeed even the management of industry has separated from its entrepreneurial control through joint stock companies, and the move from secondary to tertiary service industry has created a wholly new middle class as well as fragmenting the proletariat into skilled and unskilled workers. The result for social stratification in the modern world is a differentiation of groups within the capitalist productive system who have different positions in it, different interests from one another, different access to rewards from it and very different ideological and pragmatic commitments to it as a result. In this sense, participation in the capitalist world is very much a matter of different forms of conscious and purposive engagement with and location in its structures and not just a matter of coercive repression and false consciousness. Moreover, whatever hegemony capitalist culture has achieved for itself in terms of the legitimation of the market it has paid for by having to incorporate the interests of the proletariat as well as the bourgeoisie into its economic and political organization through the industrial distribution of material rewards, the control of economic policy, the welfare state, parliamentary democracy and trade unions.

That it could do so is partly a reflection of technological development that increases the productivity of labour and therefore wages but also the flexibility of its ideological and political institutions which provide for a redistribution of power within it. That capitalism works is because it is able to harness the interests of the members of society and provide the rewards in terms of which they commit themselves to it. But, if it is the material organization of capitalist society which creates and organizes work, life and reward within it, it is culture and ideology (i.e. social consciousness) that sanctions, legitimates and commits its members to this on a pragmatic, interested and purposive basis. So revolution or commitment is not a matter of economic determination but a judgement of advantage in relation

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

to economic and social conditions by the members of society. Emancipation and progress, then, may be what people themselves decide they want and on the terms in which they see it, and this has proved to be, in capitalist society, what its members conceive themselves as getting from it and not what Marx theorized as their interests. In this, of course, the desire for commodities and its satisfaction cancels whatever forms of exploitation and alienation have been presented as the conditions in terms of which capitalism can make this work, but then this, in turn, raises the issue of whether a society which satisfies its members' desires and commits them to it in this way is entirely exploitative and alienating. That capitalism transforms human needs into material demands is the strength of Marx's materialism and his analysis of capitalist society in terms of it. That this transformation has now taken on a symbolic and cultural character as opposed to a merely utilitarian and material one is not something that Marx addresses. But that this only dehumanizes human beings and commodifies social existence is, however, disputable since it is a claim that legislates for need and human nature and ignores and denies the validity of its cultural and conscious expression. On the other hand, where the Marxist analysis of capitalism begins to bite differently and more powerfully is in the ways in which capitalism has developed as a world system, in which the workings of an international market now become a major determinant of and limit upon state sovereignty and the government of national state economies rather than a structure of class relations.

The concept of society as a system, which is there in Durkheim, functionalism and Marx, reappears in structuralism but now differently and with a realist philosophical stance which is closely allied to materialism in terms of its commitment to the objectivity of the world and its scientific study but rejects the positivism, empiricism and historicism of traditional forms of materialism. For **realism**, the reality of the world cannot simply be reduced to the empirical observation and perception of it and so explained in terms of the causal relationships between its phenomena that have been established factually on this basis. This would be to confuse reality with human perception and experience and make the events of that reality a product of them. Rather reality must be understood as existing separately from its surface appearances in these terms and consisting of its own objective and structural organization which generates the nature of phenomena and events of the world in terms of the modalities and processes through which this structural organization works. This reality can only be grasped through a theoretical and not an empirical understanding of its nature which observes the events and phenomena in terms of how their character is necessarily produced by the ways in which reality is structured. It is in these terms that structuralism understands society as a system in which its social formations and social relationships are determined by the logic of its underlying and real structural organization as a system. However, with sociological structuralism, the model of the

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

system which is applied to society is one which is drawn from the semiotic conception of language as a system of signs whose meaning is governed by the underlying and determinative rules of organization which are the basis of the system.

Within sociology, structuralism has largely been associated with the ideational although not idealistic position of the late Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss and the Marxist materialist position of Althusser. Durkheim's position argued that, ultimately, the sociality of society depends on a sense of communal existence by its members and an organization of this structurally which requires the collective symbolic, cognitive and moral ordering of social life, i.e. a collective consciousness and collective representations of society and the world through which it is understandable, experienceable and organizable in communal terms. So a common culture is necessary for the existence of society, but this, in turn, arises from and within the morphological and material structures of society on a concomitant basis and in relation to which culture provides the means for their instantiation on an institutional and conscious basis within it. Symbolically, the collective representation of society and the collective moral and cognitive systems which it produces are presented in the form of God but, as society becomes more complex and the division of labour becomes its material foundation, reason and science replace religion as the basis of knowledge in society and secular ideologies replace religion as its moral foundation. Society, then, is a system whose reality and identity is composed of the underlying relationships between its structure and culture.

Lévi-Strauss takes this further by bringing a specifically linguistic model of system to bear upon society. Unlike Durkheim, he argues that the systemic interrelations between the symbolic and structural elements of society are not those of diachronic and causal determination but are structured and synchronic relationships of meaning. Just as a language is a meaningful system of signs which is structured by its own underlying grammar which gives signs their meaning, so society is a system of social organization which possesses an underlying grammar, the rules of which generate the institutional forms, social relations and social consciousness that this social organization takes. This social grammar is the grammar of mythology and, ultimately, it is a grammar that stems from the nature of the human mind itself. All societies are encultured and organized through a dominant mythology (which is the collective consciousness of society) that generates the sense, meaning and nature of life for its members, and this is because mythology constitutes the way in which the human mind thinks (even science has a mythological character). Because of this, mythology, despite the variety of forms of its expression, reveals a common basic structure, and it is the scientific understanding of this that reveals the nature of the social organization of society since this is its underlying and real foundation. So, in these terms, Lévi-Strauss engages in a cross-cultural analysis of the mythologies of societies to reveal the common structural

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

form of myths and their determination of social life as a cultural relation with the natural world, and the problems of such for human and social existence within it that myths structurally symbolize and resolve. In this, mythology and its structuring and organization of social existence is presented by Lévi-Strauss as a synchronic system of relationships of proximity and coincidence in terms of the relationship between the structural and symbolic order of society and not a diachronic relationship of history and causality. Society, then, is like a language with an underlying grammar, and like language it forms a system that determines the organization of its social relationships.

In contrast to Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss, Althusser constructs a specifically materialist form of structuralism which draws upon the distinction that Marx makes in *Das Kapital* between the essence of the capitalist system and its empirical formation in terms of its underlying organization of production. But in this, Althusser rejects the base/superstructure distinction made by Marx in favour of a materialist conception of society as the total system of economic, political and cultural institutions and formations which are structurally organized and shaped by the relations of mutual determination and autonomy that exist between them as a system, and in which the economic is an overall determinant only in the final analysis. In these terms, the culture and collective consciousness of society too comprise a structure that is determined and determining in relation to the other structures of the system. In this it constitutes an ideological set of representations – images and concepts – which cement society together by creating a sense of their nature that would otherwise be opaque for its members, and this integrates them into it by forming their subjectivity and producing in them an acceptance of the economic and political roles that society allocates to them.

The ideological character of culture lies in the fact that it disguises the conditioning role that it plays in society as it mythologizes the reality of the system as opposed to offering knowledge of its nature. Culture and consciousness, then, as in all structuralist theory, are not a vehicle of subjective articulation and creative action on the part of individuals but a structure which imposes its own form of subjectivity and consciousness upon them. And, for Althusser, it is part of the material organization of production of society in the same way as its economic and political structures are, and it fulfils the ideological role of representing, articulating and legitimating them by structuring the consciousness of the members of society in accordance with their requirements. For Althusser, then, capitalism has to be seen as a class-bound system of production in which social relationships are generated and class rule is maintained by the underlying structural organization that the mode of production creates. But this organization is instantiated not just in its economic structures but also through the necessary and interrelated political institutions of coercion (the state and its apparatuses) and the ideological means of subjection (the dominant culture

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

and the agents of its dissemination, namely the family and education) which are also a necessary part of this organization and its maintenance. So the former translates economic relationships into relationships of political power in society, and the latter creates the willing acceptance of life and labour within it. So the exploitative economic and social system which is capitalist society and the class structure in terms of which this manifests itself are both politically enforced and simultaneously disguised on an ideological level. Only through a structuralist scientific analysis which theoretically understands and empirically reveals the underlying nature of the structural organization of the capitalist system is it possible to penetrate the ideological disguise beneath which capitalism hides. This, then, will become the only weapon for a revolution against capitalism and the transformation of society to socialism (Cuff and Payne 1979).

For structuralism, then, society is a system of real and objective structures which has its own logic of organization that determines and shapes the nature of the social formations and relationships of which it is composed. The problem with this is that it objectivates society to the point at which it severs its organization from any form of historical and human agency within it; it eliminates history, subjectivity and action from its portrait of social life in favour of the economic, political and ideational determination of every aspect of social existence at a structural level by the social system as a system, which is the only reality that society possesses. Its members, then, have no identity, life and world apart from that which the system gives them.

POSTMODERN SOCIOLOGIES

With postmodern sociologies the idealism/materialism debate as such disappears since science itself is now in contention, let alone a sociological science of society. Postmodern sociologies attack the whole idea of truth, universality, certainty and objectivity which any form of science and scientific knowledge proposes. And with this, they reject systemic and structural understanding and analyses of society, arguing for a thorough historicization of it which sees its different forms of consciousness, knowledge, identities, significations, organization, etc. as historically produced and relative. And, in doing this, the whole idea of the individual as an autonomous subject, as the source of reason and knowledge in the social world produced by purposive action, which is the foundation stone of idealism, is rejected. Materialism doesn't entirely disappear in postmodern sociologies but surfaces in the **constructionism** that lies at the heart of their approach to society, in which language and discourse are treated as reflexively generative of the processes of social life in terms of their historical, political and cultural construction of identity and the social

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

formations of society. But, in terms of this, society is no longer conceived of as a unified totality that has an underlying systemic and structural organization (Bauman 1992a).

Baudrillard is a major contributor to postmodern sociology. He argues that contemporary society has now become a postmodern world which is no longer structured by production and relations of economic exchange (the modern world) but exists in terms of symbolic exchanges. It is now a consumer society of heterogeneous groupings which is culturally differentiated through the proliferation of signs and significations generated by new technologies and systems of information production within it. In these terms signs have now taken on a life of their own and become the primary determinants of social experience. Signs, and their codes of representation, replace reality by images (what Baudrillard calls a process of simulation) to the point at which the real disappears into the image as opposed to being something separate from it. So a world of hyper-reality has been created which implodes into a black hole of meanings and messages that neutralize one another in a constant flow of information, advertising, politics, entertainment, etc., which sucks in the members of society as this solicits them to buy, consume, work, register an opinion, participate in society, etc. So the contemporary world is a world of simulacra with no structures and boundaries – an artificial creation in which reality disappears into a haze of images, signs and meanings. Under the weight of this, human agency is eliminated because images and signs control its practice, and action only generates more signs, images and meanings which only add to the hyper-reality since they have no more claim on the real than any others.

That the contemporary world is an information bound and flooded world in which consumption is crucial to its life is an important issue. Signs and signification are a central part of its organization and function on an ideational level particularly in terms of the role of consumption for the definition of self and social identity. But Baudrillard overdraws the picture of hyper-reality. Social reality has not disappeared into signification but continues to exist in political and economic organizations, social divisions, technological and administrative practices, etc. What Baudrillard's sociology lacks is any real conception of structure because he fails to address the economic and political bases of signs and signification except in terms of a rather crude, material and technological determinism which focuses upon the place of information systems within the contemporary world. Moreover, because of this, his negative estimation of the possibilities of action ignores the chance of a critical engagement with signs and significations in terms of an understanding of their relationship with a dependence on the structural organization of society. The relativization and dissolution of reality into signification is not justified empirically in terms of the structures which its members actually recognize and experience as conditions of and constraints upon their actions.

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

Some of these problems recur with Foucault's specifically poststructuralist sociology. He moves away from Baudrillard's argument about the power, social control and reflexive production exercised by signs and images in the contemporary world to a consideration of the nature of the power and control that are exercised by its forms of discipline and governmentality. For Foucault, the organization of society lies in the discursive practices that are its mode of government, i.e. the historical, political and economically located systems of thought that are embodied as a social understanding of social life and the associated technologies which they produce for organizing it. These have their own internal rationality and they establish regimes of the governmentality of society. Discursive practices then are forms of power through which self-identity, social relationships and social life are historically generated, constructed and produced. And, in this sense their organizational genealogy historically unearths the emergent systems of thought and its practices as epistemes constituted in terms of the determinative rationality with which they reflexively organize knowledge and produce their form of governmentality of the world. But the historical emergence of such epistemes is seen by Foucault not as a process of ongoing and continuous development, but as a series of discontinuities and disjunctions between epistemes. There is, then, no grand narrative structure in terms of which the history and development of society can be understood, as classical sociology has attempted to produce. Moreover, science too is only another episteme which is reflexively grounded in its own organizational form of rationality and is not an absolute, objective and universal form of knowledge. Instead it constructs and produces its own regimes of power in terms of its own discursive practices.

On this basis, Foucault argues that the contemporary world is a carceral society based on a moral technology of social control produced by Enlightenment and scientific discourse and practices, which submits its members and their bodies to government through their minds and souls on the basis of knowledge and ideas that make a claim to universal objectivity and moral necessity. The form which this power and governmentality take is one of the constant and systematic supervision and surveillance of social life which enforces an exacting discipline on people. It entails a panopticon vision that regulates and schedules all social activities spatially, hierarchically and collectively to create a disciplined environment in which order is produced through the control of every fragment of the lives of people, in terms of formal regulation and informal surveillance to ensure conformity. This discipline extends into the person and is designed to create docility through a moral transformation of the individual into a hard-working, conscience-ridden and useful creature who meet the needs of production and warfare in a rational, efficient and technical society. It is a discipline with a technology of government that thrives on normalizing conceptions of identity and sociality which derive from rational and

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

scientific knowledge and its professional use, which carry with them the right to punish people who do not fit into its categories of normality. Moreover, this disciplinary organization of contemporary society is anonymous, dispersed and comprehensive: no one owns it but everyone is subject to it. The subject, then, is created in terms of the regimes of discipline and governance and the rituals of truth embodied in Enlightenment and scientific knowledge which sustain them. He/she now has no inner essence but is discursively and socially conditioned and situated with the power relationships and their technologies of the soul which enforce versions of normality on the person and which he/she internalizes. So, for Foucault, discipline and power in the contemporary world are determinative of its nature and the subject within it.

The problem, however, is the absolute nature of Foucault's constructionist position which is not and cannot be the comprehensive portrait of the contemporary social world that is claimed for it. The treatment of society in terms of its discursive formation alone carries its own limits along with it, in which the problems addressed by materialist and idealist sociologies resurface. Firstly, the genealogical analysis of the emergence of the contemporary Western world that Foucault produces in terms of the historical discontinuities and disjunctions in its governing episteme is partial, highly selective and empirically problematic in the light of the economic, political and other conditions which it excludes. Secondly, by emphasizing the decentralization and anonymity of power in the contemporary social world, Foucault misses other and crucial things about it which demonstrate that it is also structured in relation to social divisions in society; tied to ownership and control by dominant social groups in which it serves their interests and maintains social hierarchies; and concentrated economically and politically in the various institutional organizations of society. Finally, the disappearance of human agency is a major problem of Foucault's position. For Foucault, the subject is a product of the discursive regimes of the government of the body and soul of the individual, but he undertakes no *verstehen* or analysis which would concretely demonstrate this. Instead the subject is theorized out of his analysis by the commitment to constructionism. Yet, in the end, even Foucault is forced to recognize that reason and scientific knowledge are not merely power and regulation but can be utilized for purposes of autonomous self-control, which brings the individual as agent back into the picture of social life.

The problem with postmodern thought is that, by entirely replacing a consideration of society in terms of structure and agency by construction, signification and discourse, this leaves the production of social life with neither a concrete nor an interactional location but primarily a theoretical one. This constitutes not the conclusion of the historical narration of society but only a new, different and relativistic form of it which is highly problematic, particularly when the empirical has been placed in parentheses.

IDEALISM/MATERIALISM

KEY CONCEPTS

IDEALISM The argument that the social world is an intersubjective and cultural world of consciousness, meaning, values and purposive action on the part of its members, which has to be understood in order to be explained.

MATERIALISM The argument that society consists of real and objective structures and institutions which have a historical, economic, political, technological and administrative foundation of their organization which determines their nature and which produces the social activities that take place within them.

Realism The argument that social reality exists independently of our empirical perception of it, and has underlying, essential and objective structure which consists of a systemic and productive organization that determines the social formation and social relations within it and which must be grasped theoretically in order to explain them.

Constructionism The argument that social reality is historically and reflexively constructed and produced through the systems of signification, knowledge and discursive practices in terms of which it is represented, organized and enacted.