

Theory/Practice

Paul Filmer

The relation between theory and practice is central to sociology. It is to be found at the origins of the discipline, at the beginnings of what Habermas (1987) has termed the 'unfinished project' of modernity. Indeed, when Talcott Parsons (1902–79) sought, in the middle of the twentieth century, to establish an encyclopaedic synthesis of theories of society (Parsons et al. 1961), the origins of modern social theory were located in the work of Nicolo Machiavelli (1469–1527) on how the new city states of Renaissance Europe could most effectively be governed according to the secular principles of their rational humanist culture. And as Bierstedt (1959; 1978) has noted, there has been no interruption to the propensity of successive generations of 'modern' social theorists to locate their work in the dominant Western mythological traditions of both Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman thought. All human societies that have left records of their practices show a preoccupation with the condition and character of themselves as societies – a tendency to speculate about the adequacy of the general principles in terms of which they are organized. This preoccupation is what is meant by social theory and it is undertaken most actively as a social practice at times when societies are most concerned about the stability of their collective condition, the times at which societies undergo change.

Reasons for the active pursuit of theory as societies change are not hard to find. When members of societies recognize that the interactional structures through which they are related to one another are changing they recognize also the fragility of society, because it is an *idea*. Berger (1966) puts the issue in an interesting light when he differentiates between two related concepts to which the idea of society is fundamental: those of the

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

'individual in society' and its converse, 'society in the individual'. Society both produces the individual and is produced by it. Society itself is a concept, an idea, a product of theories generated and sustained in practice by the actions of individuals and groups (Schutz 1971). Thus, the specific and observable practices of social action and interaction are grounded in a fundamental, dichotomous and dialectical relation with their more general, abstract and theoretical origins in the idea of society. What is often termed the classical tradition in sociological theory (see, for example, Nisbet 1966; Truzzi 1971; Lemert 1993) is organized around this dichotomy and can be recovered in terms of it through an examination of three approaches to the construction of sociological theory and the ways in which they conceptualize social practice. The approaches are those of holism, individualism and Marxism, and each will be discussed in turn below. Before proceeding to this, however, it is worth noting several further implications of the dichotomous relation between theory and practice in sociology.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY/PRACTICE DICHOTOMY

First, *theory implies comparison*, in two senses. The first of these has already been invoked: the *comparison with practice*. For sociological theory, the idea of society is tested for adequacy according to the extent that it can be put into practice and thereby realized as a way for individuals and groups to live an ordered and collective life. The second sense follows from this, and is itself a form of practice which stems from the origins of theory in thought and ideas. Because theories are generated through speculative thought, there is no necessary limit to the potential number of alternative theories that might be created in this way. Whether a theory can be realized in practice is an important test of its adequacy because it is one way in which a limit can be set on the number of theoretically possible forms of society that are worth conceptualizing. Theories, thus, can be *compared with one another* in terms of their adequacy to the tasks which they are required to perform (Layder 1994; Waters 1994).

This introduces the second implication: *theory implies method as a form of practice*. If theories are to be tested in practice, in order to decide on their adequacy, and if they are to be compared with one another on that basis, then the means by which such tests and comparisons are to be conducted have to be developed in relation to the theories. This necessity gives rise to a specialist form of theory, termed **methodology**, which is concerned with fundamental logical and philosophical questions which underlie the testing and application of theory in its relations to practice (Runciman 1983). The conduct of such testing and application is through research, which depends in turn on a central methodological concern of sociological theory with the status of sociology as a science. This concern is located in questions of what

counts as adequate evidence in scientific sociology; how far scientific methods of sociological research match those of the natural and physical sciences; and how far, therefore, it is possible to formulate general propositions about the structure and processes of the social world which match the predictive accuracy of those which can be formulated about the natural world.

This methodological concern with scientific sociology, however, stands to some extent in tension with a third implication of the theory/practice dichotomy: *theory is critical*. Sociological theories are formulated not only to explain and analyse reality; they can be formulated also to *change* the structure and institutional order of society. Moreover, such change can be proposed in pursuit of particular interests that are present in existing societies but which are not yet dominant in them. This characteristic of theory as **critique** implies not only the critical formulation of a new, alternative social order, but two further critical qualities of theory as well. It implies, first, the means by which the new social order will be achieved in practice – that is, a *theory of social change*. This can involve a gradual and active piecemeal engineering of the transition from one societal condition to another (social reform), an inductive theory of the inevitability of the process of change according to some overarching historicist design (social evolution), or the accomplishment of a more radical, rapid and hence unpredictable transformation (social revolution). Secondly, and as a feature of theorizing change, critical theory is concerned also with the justification and **legitimation** of new social orders, and it is here that it can be seen to be in tension with the methodological concerns of sociology as science. For the principal means by which theoretical conceptions of alternative societal forms are elaborated is through the **ideologies** implied by social and political philosophies. There is, thus, an important relation between critical theory and ideological practice which leads Blum (1970), for example, to argue that the body of theoretical knowledge that any society holds about itself is what he terms a ‘normative order’ of thought for that society. That is to say, it does not just *inform* members about the condition of their society and the interactional relations which constitute it. It operates also as a set of *constraints* on their practices to ensure that they continue to reproduce the conditions which make possible the continuation of that society as one which knows and reproduces itself in that way. This feature of the practice of theory is often termed its **reflexivity** (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984).

This point returns us to the beginning of the discussion, where it was noted that the centrality of the theory/practice dichotomy in sociology is related to the origins of the discipline itself in the formulation of the concept of ‘modern’ society. Societies which see themselves as modern are, by definition, societies that have to justify themselves in terms of a theory of change and a theory of order that is not available from any source other than the practice of their own reflexive theorizing – the theorizing which they undertake about themselves. Because they are modern, they cannot be

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

explained in terms of tradition, since to be modern is to be differentiated from the past, from history and its prior determinations. Similarly, modern societies are utterly contemporary, and cannot be allowed the theoretical luxury of indulging in a future predicated, with an inevitable continuity, on a present determined by its past. The practical implications of this for conventional theory have led to the formulation of a theory of postmodern society (see chapter 'Modernity/Postmodernity'). This is the most recent instance of the necessity of theory to an understanding of the complex practices that are the routine existential experience of the individuals and groups which constitute modern societies. Earlier instances of the same tradition are those of holism, individualism and Marxism, which can now be considered in further detail.

HOLISTIC THEORY AND SOCIOLOGICAL FUNCTIONALISM

Holistic theories are so termed because they are based on the contention that the relation between the individual and society is set by the structural character of society itself, since human individuals are essentially social beings, conceived, born and brought up in a network of interactional human relations. At their most general level of discourse, holistic theorists argue that all human societies are composed of an effectively infinite number of such networks, each of which is organized analytically by a structurally identical ordering principle, and is a microcosm of larger structures (social institutions). These larger structures are, in turn, inter-related as whole societies which determine the common interactional order of the microcosmic networks which make them up.

The leading nineteenth-century exponent of **holism** was Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) who argued that sociology's scientific task is to study the causes and functions of what he termed social facts – social, that is, as opposed to physical or psychological facts about human actions. Physical facts are determined by the substantive activities of which the human organism is capable through the operations of its neuro-muscular physique, and psychological facts are the individual manifestations of the electro-chemical operation of its neuro-physiological structure. Both types of facts, moreover, are properties of the human species and can be generalized about, with few variations, between different cultures and across historical periods. Social facts, by contrast, cannot be reduced to physical or psychological actions and processes, and thus cannot be explained causally in terms of them.

Durkheim argues that social facts are the emergent properties of human actions and interactions. Rather than being expressive manifestations of the physiological properties of the human species, they are made manifest and observable as the structures of constraint that regulate the relations between human individuals and groups: they are the products of the ability of human

beings to communicate with one another and to structure their interactions and interrelations. They are, that is to say, theoretical and abstract ideas. It is for this reason that Durkheim (1938) insists, as a rule of scientific sociological method, that they must be studied *as if* they are things (*comme les choses*). Durkheim goes on to classify them in order of increasing generality and abstraction, from informal rules of conduct, such as interactional etiquette and manners, to the formal laws which order whole societies and the overarching institutions of government and judiciary which establish and administer them. The enormous trans-historical and cross-societal variety of these institutions, as well as the range of differences in their interpretation and application within large-scale modern societies, support Durkheim's contention that social facts cannot be reduced to the universal characteristics of human physiology and psychology. But this very argument makes problematic the realization of the central aims of general theory in a scientific sociology. These aims seek to formulate general propositions about the fundamental characteristics of human societies: how they provide for their collective material needs, how they regulate and award priorities to the pursuit of the competing interests of differentiated groups of members, and how they maintain the coherence of their institutional structure and the integrity of their geographical and political boundaries. The sheer variety of effective solutions to these problems that have been accomplished by different societies over time suggests that such general propositions are difficult to establish, and even more difficult to test, in the way required by the conception of scientific method of the natural and physical sciences which Durkheim sought to adapt to the study of society. But this difficulty itself exemplifies the relation between sociological theory and its operationalization through the practice of sociological method. Sociology's claims to be a science are themselves a product of theories which determine how social scientific research is to be practised.

From amongst the considerable number of practical solutions to the fundamental problems of human society that can be adduced from historical and comparative sociological research, Durkheim (1933) argues that two types of societal forms predominate. He identifies these, in terms of the principles through which they cohere as structural wholes, as types of solidarity: mechanical and organic. *Mechanical social solidarity* is produced by replicating the fundamental social interrelationship of nuclear family kinship in marriage and parenthood, which produces sets of extended interrelations of consanguinity (shared blood) within and between several generations of families. These elaborated family networks are called clans, and are themselves interrelated in turn into tribes – which is the typical form taken by mechanically solid societies. Each clan is self-sufficient and consists of self-contained extended families; and each tribal society is composed of self-sufficient clans, all elements of which are effectively identical in structure. *Organic social solidarity* is produced, by contrast, through differentiation rather than identity. The fundamental social relations

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

between individuals are based no longer on the ascribed status into which they are born as members of a consanguine, tribally contained and clan-based family. They are based instead on the socially regulated contracts which they are able to make with one another from the social positions which they have achieved by their own actions. Durkheim argues that these positions stem from a non-consanguine structure of social interrelations of interdependency, which are based upon a differentiation of the specialized skills of material production and social administration which he terms the *social* division of labour. This is quite different from what may be termed the *natural* division of labour in mechanically solid societies, which is limited largely to the natural specializations of skill that result from differences in age (physical maturity) and biological sex, and which reinforces the relatively unspecialized social solidarity achieved through replication of structurally identical social relations.

The change from mechanically to organically solid societies is proposed by Durkheim as an evolutionary one of the development of societies from structural simplicity to structural complexity. It is a manifestation, thus, of a holistic theory of social structure and a correlative theory of social change. Durkheim sees the change also as one of social progress. Organic solidarity is the normal structural condition of modern society, since the scale of structural interrelation is limited only by the possibilities that can be developed in terms of rational, secular human interests. The social and political orders of human communities are no longer limited necessarily by the belief systems and traditions of myth and religion. The increasingly large-scale and complex integration of modern societies results from the interdependence on one another of the individuals and groups which constitute them for the performance of the multifarious specialist tasks which fulfil the range of their various needs. Whereas mechanically solid societies are characterized structurally by primary groups whose members are routinely in face-to-face interaction with one another, organically solid societies proliferate through the development of secondary associations, such as bureaucracies, which facilitate interrelations between large and diversely differentiated groups in pursuit of their collective interests without necessarily requiring their members ever to be in face-to-face interaction. Durkheim argues further that this produces a new social morality which is grounded in the altruism that is generated by the interdependence between individuals and groups which is characteristic of the social division of labour. It is for this reason that structurally complex societies are described as organically solid: in theorizing their social structure, Durkheim makes a metaphorical comparison between the structure of complex, modern society and that of a biological organism, just as the type of structure which characterizes premodern societies, in being termed mechanical, is likened to a machine in the predictability of its operation. In organically solid societies, all parts are interdependent in their contribution to the well-being of the whole and are unable to function independently of the overall structure of

interrelations in which they are implicated. It is the normal structural and processual condition for human societies that all recurrent, patterned activities of social interaction operate as functional parts of the whole which, in turn, sets the structure of their patterned character and ensures their recurrence and, like an organism, enables them to adapt to and alter their environment in order to sustain and develop themselves. Any recurrent activities that fail to contribute functionally to the continuing welfare of the social whole risk introducing pathological societal conditions, such as that of anomie, a condition which Durkheim terms *le mal de l'infini* (the sickness of infinite possibility), in which individuals are unable to accept or understand the need for their actions to be determined and regulated by collective principles which express the structural needs of society as a whole. Another example of such pathology offered by Durkheim is class conflict, which occurs as a result of members of a specific socio-economic group (class) putting their collective interests above those of society as a whole.

It is because of this theory of the determining relations between social structures and practical interactional processes that the school of holistic sociological theory based upon Durkheim's work is termed *structural-functional analysis* (see Merton 1957). It is also the basis for what later comes to be termed *systems theory* (Parsons 1951; Buckley 1967), since the determining relation between social structures, institutional processes and interactional practices is developed in terms of the theoretical principle of their reciprocal functionality for one another. This principle is proposed as common to all human societies, whatever their historicity or culture, and hence what identifies them as manifestations of the irreducible system of the universal collective (that is, social) condition of humankind.

Sociological holism, thus, is a critical theoretical analysis and explanation of the structure of relations between the individual and society. It accounts for the forms that the collective institutional orders of these relations take in practice, how they differ in comparison to one another between cultures and how they change over time. It proposes also a set of methodological practices by which these issues are most appropriately studied. In addition, to the extent that such studies are critically adequate, it can provide criteria in terms of which it is possible to identify the most effective structural forms of society from the point of view of the differing political and economic interests and moral ideals of the members of the groups which constitute them.

SOCIAL ACTION THEORY AND METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM

Social action theorists, in contrast to functionalists, contend that the individual/society relation can only be analysed and explained through

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

the practical social actions of individuals themselves, since only individuals actually exist as material, physical realities. Rather than seeing society as an institutionalized structure of relations which determine individual actions, social action theory argues that it is a concept generated by the theories, ideas and beliefs which individuals hold in common, and represents the stable, institutional basis which makes it possible for them to do so. It is this insistence on making the individual member of society the basis of sociological explanation that leads the practice of theorizing in terms of social action to be termed methodological **individualism**.

The major nineteenth-century exponent of social action theory and its concomitant individualist method was Max Weber (1864–1920). Weber argued as strongly that the social actions of the individual could *not* be reduced to determination by society as Durkheim argued the opposing position, that the actions of individuals *are* societally determined. And like Durkheim, he found it necessary to pay careful attention to the identification and definition of the proper topic of scientific sociological inquiry – not society, or even the individual as such, but the specific phenomenon of *social* action. Weber (1947) differentiates social action from individual action, which he sees as the conscious purposive behaviour of a particular individual motivated by his or her own interests. Action is, in turn, differentiated from behaviour, which he treats as an essentially psychological phenomenon occasioned by neuro-physiological reflexes such as a sneeze, a cough or a blink. Finally, action is differentiated from conduct, which Weber terms habitual action that has been learned and practised routinely to the extent that its performance no longer requires conscious reflection on the part of the actor. Social action is different from all of these phenomena because, unlike any of them, it takes account of the actual or potential presence in or relevance to the action situation of other individual social actors or groups of them: it is socially oriented. Like action itself, it is conscious and it has a purpose in being oriented to the accomplishment of a goal. But it is the focus on the actual, potential or even symbolic relevance of others to its conditions and consequences that identifies it as the proper topic of sociology. This topic is generated from the individualist theory of social action just as social facts are generated from the holist theory of structural functionalism. Both exemplify how theory generates the manner in which research is designed to test its adequacy in practice.

The conscious and purposive character of social action is, for Weber, the key to analysing its rationality; and it is through analysis of the rationality of social action that Weber develops an individualist theory of social structure. Society represents an institutionalization of the dominant mode of rationality of the social actions of its members. Thus the dominant form of institutional organization of a society is a manifestation of the dominant mode of rational consciousness amongst its members. Weber develops a method of classifying sociological phenomena into types according to the

formal characteristics of their rationality as modes of action, which he terms *ideal types*. He identifies four of these ideal types of rationality: formal/legal rationality, value rationality, traditional rationality and affectual rationality. Each of them articulates a relation between the means and ends of purposive action and thus provides a basis in terms of which social actors can negotiate together a meaning to their actions which they can share in common. Formal/legal rationality proposes an instrumental mode of action in which the most causally efficient means are employed to achieve an end. For value rational action, by contrast, the selection of means by which to pursue a goal is governed by a code of ethics. The means chosen will not necessarily be the most efficient but are intended to be the most morally appropriate. The relation of means to ends in traditional rationality is not always explicable analytically, though it can always be described. The means of achieving goals in this instance are prescribed by custom and precedent rather than by any criterion that can be established by either inductive or deductive explanation. Affectual rationality articulates the criteria of selection of means to pursue ends in terms that are governed by the near-subjective rationality of feeling and emotion and represents those cases in which it is most difficult for actors to negotiate common meanings for their social actions.

Weber terms these types of rationality ideal because none of them will be found to be the sole mode of accounting for rational social action in any particular society or group. Nor could any particular social action be explained exclusively in terms of any one of the four types. But they do enable Weber to develop a concept of social structure from his theory of social action by making possible the explication, in methodologically individualist terms, of a differentiation between two types of society, each of which is characterized by the predominance of different types of rationality. Weber develops them from the work of Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), who terms them *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (association). They are structurally similar to the mechanically and organically solid types of societies identified by Durkheim: *gemeinschaftlich* societies are based on consanguine relations, primary groups and face-to-face interaction, whereas *gesellschaftlich* societies are characterized by more impersonal, large-scale secondary associations. Societies based on community are typically premodern and characterized by traditional rationality, complemented by both value rational and affectual action. In modern societies based on association, by contrast, the dominant mode of rationality is formal/legal, complemented by the occurrence of instances of all of the other three types. The structure of such societies is dominated by the bureaucracies of the modern state and the national and multinational corporations of industrial production and administration. These formal, rational-legal organizations are the institutional social manifestation of the dominant mode of rationality, which Weber sees as encroaching increasingly on the individual's freedom of action and expression, threatening to

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

standardize human individualism into a calculative and dehumanizing impersonality.

It is this rational intellectual consciousness which is the basis of Weber's theory of social change. Unlike Durkheim, who argues that social change occurs as the structures of societies change through a process of differentiation and elaboration which he likens to the evolutionary growth of organisms, Weber (1930) sees social change as a result of conscious innovation through social action in the pursuit of the collective interests of dominant groups and which are legitimated through systems of *belief*. These processes are not necessarily general or typical of groups of societies, but occur under particular social, political, economic and cultural circumstances and, therefore, are characteristic of specific historical periods. Thus the mercantile and industrial forms of capitalism which come to dominate first Northern European and then global economies from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries, and are accompanied by the reciprocal political individualism of modern societies, are an institutional manifestation of the instrumentalism of formal/legal rational action. These forms of political economy and social order are themselves, to some extent, *theorized in advance* as a condition of social life to be brought about – that is, as a goal for the collective social action of those groups whose beliefs will legitimate the new order. In the case of the Northern European mercantile capitalism of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Weber argues, the ascetic, sectarian theology of Protestant Christianity played a crucial role by providing a belief system which legitimated the practices of individual entrepreneurialism and reinvestment through which the new economic institutions were established.

Social action theory provides a critical analysis of the structure and institutional processes of society in terms of the practices of its individual members. It shows a clear contrast to the critical *theoretical* emphasis on social structure that is characteristic of sociological holism, by giving a comparable emphasis to the *practices* of social actors. But this emphasis is complemented by the typical character of the *theorizing* that social actors have to undertake in terms of both the need to establish a coherent, rational relation between the ends that they act to achieve and the selection of the means which are socially available, or which they need to create socially to pursue them. It places the conscious practices of rational thought at the centre of human social action, which becomes identifiable as the topic of sociological inquiry as much in terms of its *meaningfulness* as by what *causes* it. The causes of social action, therefore, are not explicable primarily in methodologically holistic, social structural terms through their functions for the reinforcement of recurring social institutional processes. Instead, they are to be found in the methodologically individualist, shared social and cultural meanings of motive and intention through which social actors make sense for themselves and to one another of their interactional practices (Weber 1949). These meanings are a product of values and beliefs as much

as of reason and science. This important theoretical difference between the methodological perspectives of holism and individualism can also be discussed, in parallel substantive terms, as the sociological dichotomy between structure and agency (see chapter 'Structure/Agency').

MARXISM: PRAXIS AS THE PROPOSED UNITY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

Karl Marx (1818–83) argued a different relation between the material conditions of social life and human consciousness, and hence between theory and practice. The method by which Marxist sociologists have studied this relation, termed *dialectical* or *historical materialism*, seeks to put an equal causal emphasis in sociological explanation on theory and practice. Social actions produce and are regulated by the institutional structures through which human beings pursue their material interests collectively in competition and conflict with one another. Their interests are generated by their fundamental organic needs to feed, house, protect and reproduce themselves. Marx argues that conflict is generated initially in prehistoric and structurally simple societies, where the natural provision of the means to fulfil these needs may be in short supply. However, he claims that human beings evolve an ability, early in their history as a species, to develop and apply skills of manufacture to the resources of their natural environment and thus to transform it into the goods necessary to provide for their needs. Thus, by co-operating socially, they are able to produce these goods more efficiently. Where the resources for the production of goods remain in short supply, however, such co-operation by one group of producers protects the resources from encroachment by others. And where there is an ample supply of resources, co-operation by one group to exclude access to them by others gives the excluding group power over them because it is able to control the ability of the others to provide for the fulfilment of their material needs.

These linked practices of cooperation and conflict over material production both *precipitate* the generation of theory to devise the techniques and technology of production, and are *justified* by it, through political ideologies and jurisprudential principles which legitimate the more or less exclusive ownership and control of natural resources by some groups as their *private property*. Marx theorizes a concept of social structure, therefore, which is composed of social groups that are differentiated from one another in terms of whether or not they own and control the means of production for the fulfilment of needs required by all members of society. Marx terms these groups *classes* in modern societies. They are involved in an inevitable conflict with one another which can only be

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

resolved by a common recognition that their fundamental interests in the fulfilment of needs are held in common, and are pursued more effectively by co-operation rather than competition. But the competition between social groups for scarce resources that produces the conflict of interest between classes is seen by the classical theorists of political economy, led by Adam Smith (1723–90), as the basis of the entrepreneurial drive of capitalism and its progressive innovations which generate economic wealth.

This leads Marx to develop what he terms a *critique of political economy* in the form of a theory focused on three distinct issues. First, it reinterprets human historiography in terms of the universal, epochal struggles of class conflict. Secondly, it reinterprets the ontology of the human species in terms of a conception of human beings as workers, whose essential activity is the transformation of their natural environment through their labour to fulfil their material needs. Thirdly, and most importantly, it proposes a new social order, that of communism, to overthrow and replace the exploitation of one class by another that is characteristic of industrial capitalism. The processes of social change which will bring about this new order will take the form of a political and economic revolution that originates, according to Marx, in the social structural contradictions of capitalism and their accompanying conflicts. Despite the methodological insistence of historical materialism that the practical social relations of production determine the legitimating theories of social and political order, it is clear that the revolution which will bring about the overthrow of capitalism starts life as a theoretical idea. Revolution, for Marx, is a realization of theory in practice, a praxis in which the distinction between theory and practice is dissolved. The revolution is accomplished by the proletariat of industrial workers who are able to unite as one because, as Marx states, they have nothing to lose but the chains of their exploitation by their opposing class, the capitalist bourgeoisie. And they are led in their revolutionary practice by the theorists, both of revolution as a process of change and of the new egalitarian political economy of communism.

Marxist theory proposes a dichotomy between theory and practice which, in many respects, parallels and offers an interesting instance of that between idealism and materialism (see chapter 'Idealism/Materialism'), not least because where revolutions have occurred that have matched the theoretical order of communism in practice, they have been brought about by causes other than the structural contradictions of capitalism. And the advanced industrial capitalist societies, which Marx predicted would be most susceptible to revolutionary overthrow *because* of their internal structural conditions, have proved to be the ones most immune to it. Marxist critical social theory has preoccupied itself with this problematic of its own for much of the twentieth century. In doing so it has, ironically, reinforced the very dichotomy between theory and practice that Marx himself sought to resolve through the concept of praxis.

THEORY/PRACTICE

A further dimension to the development of Marxist critical social theory, however, is the extent to which it has explored quite explicitly the relation between the practice of theory and the pursuit of interest. This was the basis of its critique of classical political economy. By contrast, the preoccupations of both holists and individualists with establishing methodologies appropriate to a scientific sociology led them to promote a concept of theory which was essentially abstract and general and, to that extent, divorced from routine, everyday social practices, no matter how exhaustively it sought to explain them. Marxism had its own version of social science – what came to be termed scientific socialism – which treated sociology as itself a form of critical theoretical practice. This has been termed subsequently (Althusser 1971) a science of social formations, committed to changing the social situation in which it was located through a revolutionary programme based upon a systematic inquiry designed to reveal and apply the historicist laws which ordered the dynamics of social processes. Indeed, it was partly in response to the revolutionary engagement of Marxist social theory that the sociologies of Durkheim and Weber developed their more abstract concepts of theory in terms of later, positivist conceptions of science. The social systems theory, referred to above, that had been developed by the middle of the twentieth century through attempts to synthesize these concepts of theory (Parsons 1937; 1951; Merton 1957; Demerath and Peterson 1967; Alexander 1987) had become increasingly abstract and disengaged from social practice. Inevitably therefore, new concerns have been developed in social theory which are oriented more directly towards the principal changes in the interactional practices of contemporary societies (Giddens and Turner 1987).

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE THEORY/PRACTICE DICHOTOMY: POSTSTRUCTURALISM, FEMINISM, MULTICULTURALISM AND POST-COLONIALISM

Whilst Marxism may provide an example of critically engaged theory, the new concerns of theory with contemporary social practices are not necessarily formulated in Marxist terms. However, some have in common with Marxism the need for theory to engage in a critique of existing social, political and economic institutional orders which are experienced by significant groups of their members as exploitative and oppressive. The reflexivity of critical theory requires that it addresses itself also to the issue of the extent to which theory has disguised its own ideological role in *legitimizing* those orders, and this has led to a further concern in contemporary theory with its practice as **discourse**.

Two major examples of the concern of contemporary social theory with exploitation and oppression are its critiques of the traditions, first of

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

patriarchy, the construction and perpetuation of gender inequality through the domination of women by men, and its problematic correlate of *sexism*, the reduction of explanation of human action to biological sexual determinants; and, secondly of *ethnocentricity*, the interpretation of the activities of different, often socially divided groups in terms of the ethnic culture of one, or a minority of them which is dominant over the others and the imposition of this interpretation over all others, and its problematic correlate of *racism*, the reduction of explanation of human action to determinants attributed to racial characteristics. These traditions have been criticized, respectively, by feminist and multiculturalist theoretical perspectives. Their development as core dichotomies in contemporary sociology are discussed elsewhere in the chapters 'Sex/Gender' and 'Race/Ethnicity'. But two general characteristics of the relation between contemporary theory and practice should be noted.

First, both feminist and multicultural theoretical perspectives are generated from the historical particularity of cumulative collective experiences of exploitation and oppression. These experiences have occurred both within and between different societies and cultures. Both theoretical perspectives are, therefore, essentially critical both of the *substantive social and cultural orders* which have generated them, and of the *institutional structure of power relations* through which they have been sustained. Secondly, as a result of this essential feature of critique, the two perspectives have generated both substantive topics and structural orientations which have redirected social theory in the late twentieth century away from the abstraction and overgenerality of its traditional normative concerns.

Feminist theory has argued that contemporary social theory should be located on three new sites in particular: gender as a criterion of social division; the human body as a mode of non-verbal social and cultural expression; and structures of emotion and feeling as means of acquiring and expressing knowledge. To address gender as a form of social division is to make explicit, and thus accessible for criticism and change, the consequences of patriarchal history which privileges the interests of men over women as a matter of normative social institutional practice. In doing so, it exposes the implicitly ideological character of analyses of social division based upon class. Whether these analyses are orientated, like classical Marxism, to the revolutionary overthrow of industrial capitalism in favour of a classless society, or, like the liberal-conservative reformism of modern functionalism, to the amelioration of class conflict through the affluent egalitarianism that is supposedly characterized by a growing middle class, they remain unequivocally patriarchal. Feminist theory points out that to address social division exclusively in terms of class, however critically and with whatever revolutionary or reformist enthusiasm, leaves untouched the problems of inequality and exploitation of women sustained through patriarchy. Moreover, since patriarchal relations are in important respects economic relations between men and women, and are exploitative in

refusing to recognize the full economic value of much of what is treated normatively as women's work (childcare and domestic housekeeping, for example), they are implicated in, and thus reinforce, the inegalitarian structure of the distribution of wealth which is a feature of capitalist political economy (Haraway 1991; Milner 1994).

To topicalize the body as a medium of expression is to focus on one fundamental site of patriarchal appropriation of female identity. Through the unremarked upon and unremunerated physical labours of childbirth, motherhood and domestic work, women's bodies have been used as a fundamental means of the social and cultural reproduction of patriarchy. This use has, in effect, been an expropriation of women's bodies by men. Informed by feminist theory, women's movements have acted in practice to reclaim power and identities through the exercise of choice in how to articulate their interests in and through their own bodies. The implications of this have contributed significantly to the burgeoning sociological concern with the body as a medium of expression (Turner 1984; Featherstone et al. 1991; and Shilling 1993) and to the significance of the heterogeneity of human sexuality to social identity and personality (Fuss 1991; Giddens 1991; Weeks 1991).

The specifically differentiated character of feminist epistemology, with its emphases on the eroticism and sensuality of human feeling, has been developed, in important respects, in terms of the methodological concerns of poststructuralist theory, which is discussed in more detail in the chapter 'Modernity/Postmodernity'. This conjunction marked a reflexive turn in feminist theory, away from the critical sociological concern with the political economy of patriarchy, towards issues of feminist culture – specifically, with a distinctive feminist discourse. Rather than continuing to concern itself primarily with how patriarchy has pre-empted women's articulation of their experience as part of its structural positioning of them in subordinate social status and roles, poststructuralist feminist theory has deployed the method of **deconstruction** to address a different set of issues (Nicholson 1990). These are focused on the ways in which women as writers, readers, speakers of their own distinctive (non-masculine, anti-patriarchal) gendered languages have (re-)produced their own discursive culture of experiential texts as a resourceful articulation of their resistance to patriarchy (Spender 1980; Weedon 1987; Milner 1994). Among the several consequences for the theory/practice dichotomy in sociology of this feminist approach is the way it has addressed the problem of subjectivity. The resistant culture of feminism has been sustained not only in texts, but through the practices of resistance on which, often metaphorically, they reflect. This has produced a concept of personal identity in feminist theory which is fragmented – the consequence of the alienation of the expropriated subject in a socio-cultural structure of hostile domination.

In this respect, poststructuralist feminism has some concerns in common with **multiculturalist** theory. Just as modern Western societies have been

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

distinctively and, until recently, for the most part unreflexively patriarchal and sexist in character, they have also been ethnocentric and racist. And the consequent phenomenon of personality fragmentation, which poststructuralist feminists argue has been experienced by women, has been experienced also by members of those populations which have been subjected to the economic exploitation and political domination of imperialism and colonialism. These practices have been legitimated invariably by epistemologically specious racist differentiations, grounded in the ethnocentrism of the imperializing/colonizing societies, which have asserted the innate superiority of white European over non-white, non-European physiology, consciousness, culture and social structure. Those individuals and groups subject to such racial domination in the USA developed what W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) has termed double consciousness (Du Bois 1989), a concept which has been applied more recently by Gilroy (1993b) to analyse the multiple, fragmented identities of the Anglo-Caribbean/Afro-American diaspora that he terms the black Atlantic. In a parallel sense, following Said's (1978) analysis of Western conceptions of non-Western cultural identities, Spivak (1988) has identified one legacy of colonial subject constitution under capitalist imperialism, particularly in India, as the historically muted subaltern woman. Minh-ha (1989) has taken this deconstruction of the post-colonial, Third World female subject still further in arguing that she is constituted of infinite layers of identity differentiated by experience.

Multiculturalist theory has displaced the traditional sites of modern social theory, away from those of the dominant ethnocentric interests of Western industrial capitalist societies, by exposing the extent to which their development depended upon imperialism and colonialism. This displacement has produced a type of socio-cultural practice that has been termed post-colonial, and which is committed to a decentring of the dominant, concentric model of metropolitan European societal structure. **Post-colonialism** represents, instead, an inevitably uncentred, because diasporic, subversion of concentric metropolitan society by a structure of dispersed, peripheral groupings. Instead of a controlled heterogeneity of relatively uniformly structured subcultures, post-colonial society is multicultural in character and challenges the hegemonic historical narratives of globalism which have been developed as the postmodern equivalent of the historicist meta-narratives of imperialism and colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989; Adam and Tiffin 1991; Bhaba 1990). Both post-colonialist and multiculturalist theory are poststructuralist in character and are grounded, as is that of poststructuralist feminism, in the sustained, collective experience of subordination of self through the imposition of an identity as other – as subject to oppression. All three forms of contemporary theory show clearly the extent to which it is both dependent on, and necessary for, the reflexive ordering of the eclectic variety of interactional practices in the postmodern social world.

KEY CONCEPTS

THEORY Theory is the realization and construction of the world in thought. The theoretical life is not simply one of contemplation for the anticipation is that theory constitutes changes in human conditions and particularly critical theory and action theory which are dedicated to the production of social change.

PRACTICE Practice is seen as human intervention in the social process, a dynamic involvement and commitment on the part of people to change their circumstances. It is difficult to conceive of practice uninformed by theory, but also vice versa.

Methodology The branch of sociological theory which is concerned with the most adequate and efficient ways of applying and testing theory in practice. It involves both the study of method against criteria of its adequacy as discourse and its application as a means of testing the explanatory claims of theory and their range of practical application.

Critique The practice of formulating social theory which seeks not only to explain the structure and processes of the society(ies) to which it refers, but also to provide a diagnosis of its/their organizational and ethical shortcomings, a design for an alternative and a proposal of the changes required to implement it.

Legitimation The practices by which a society justifies a particular order of institutional and interactional relations. These are routine practices for all societies and usually take a number of forms, such as a dominant set or system of beliefs, a set of statutes and their administration which regulate important (e.g. political and economic) relations, and a system for the reproduction of culture.

Ideology A set of ideas, beliefs, values and concepts organized coherently into a persuasive account of the causes, conditions and directions of societies – often as important features of their cultures. Ideology has often been contrasted with theory, in senses in which the latter is tied to science for its meaning, on the grounds that whereas theory is concerned with *truthful* explanation, ideology offers explanations in terms of partial interests.

Reflexivity A property of theory because it is an essential feature of language, reflexivity is that constitutive quality of language in use that resists its reduction to a medium of correspondence. Language not only describes what it refers to, but constitutes it reflexively. This is accomplished in terms of the user's intended meaning, the additional meaningful connotations that are available in

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

the language through its cultural location, but which have not been intended, and the interpreter's selective understanding of the intended meanings and unintended connotations.

Holism An approach to sociological explanation that identifies its proper topic of inquiry as society as a whole, composed of interdependent and functionally reciprocal parts. Two significant consequences of this are, first, that it implies a socially determinist view of the individual as a product of society; and secondly, that societies are essentially conservative in developing recurrent institutional practices which are functionally necessary to their continued existence.

Individualism An approach to sociological explanation that, in contrast to holism, identifies its proper topic of inquiry as the individual member of society, conceived as a social actor in the Weberian sense - that is, whose actions take account of the actual or symbolic presence of others in the situations in which they occur. Societies, thus, are seen as the dynamic creations of individuals, despite the fact that the institutional structures through which societies are organized constrain individual freedom of action.

Discourse A term used by poststructuralists, especially Derrida and Michel Foucault (1926-84), to characterize a system of (usually verbal) semiotic practices of writing, reading and expressive and interpretive communicative exchange. Discursive interpretations are characterized by their explicit, reflexive attention to the ideological character endemic to the signs employed, and thus implied in the meanings which the signs are deployed to construct (Derrida 1978; Foucault 1972).

Deconstruction A method of interpretive reading of texts developed by the poststructuralist Jacques Derrida (1930-). It is based on a concept of language as decentred in the sense of not being dominated by a prescriptive set of preferred meanings. Reading of linguistic texts, therefore, is an exploration of the play of differences in the meanings reflexively available in the texts' constitutive words and the interrelations between them.

Multiculturalism A mode of contemporary social theory which conceptualizes late (or post-) modern societies as composed inevitably of a multiplicity of culturally differentiated groups. Many of these groups exist in a subversive relation to the traditional forms of societal domination and social order on the grounds of earlier experience of exploitation and oppression by or within them.

Postcolonialism A mode of contemporary social theory, closely related to multiculturalism, but focused initially and specifically on non-European societies