

Subject/Object

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That society has a real existence is, of course, the starting point for sociology that provides the basis for its own existence as a discipline. However, the problem for sociology has always been what kind of reality society is, because this also decides the nature of sociology and sociological enquiry. In this respect sociology has to a great extent been divided between a theoretical stance deriving from idealism, which emphasizes the subjective character of society and the social relationships of which it is composed, and a theoretical stance deriving from positivism and materialism, which emphasizes the objective nature of society as a structurally and institutionally based organization of social relationships (often seen as a system) that determines and constrains the lives of its members. With regard to the first position, then, consciousness and meaning are argued to lie at the centre of social life in the sense that social relations are organized around the ideas, interests, values and motives of its members who act and interact with one another in terms of them. Society emerges in and through the processes of action and interaction and is constituted as a reality by their intersubjective and socially meaningful nature. Therein lies the objectivity of society's existence that it is not objective in the sense that the natural world is a world of physical or material objects although society has an empirical reality. On this basis, sociology cannot become nor need it be a science in the manner of the natural sciences, but rather is an interpretive discipline which is based upon an attempt to understand as well as observe social action and social life in an empirical analysis of it. The claim it makes to scientific status, then, is a claim only that understanding and observation are conducted on a systematic basis so that the explanations which this

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

kind of sociology produces are based upon empirical evidence, except that this evidence shows how action and social life find their basis in the meanings, interests, values and motives of the social actors themselves and examines how their actions are determined and organized in these terms. It is the social organization of social relationships at the level of meaning, consciousness and agency that becomes the primary interest of sociologies that focus on the subjective and intersubjective constitution of society. And steadily this condition moves to a treatment of society as a constructed reality rather than a given, pre-existent and determinant world.

Positivistic sociologies, on the other hand, reject this emphasis on society as a socially constructed world of meaningfully organized social interaction in favour of a sense of its essentially objective and factual existence as a reality that exists in its own right and consists of a determinate order of social structures and institutions that are historically and socially conditioned and which organize social relationships, action and life within society. In the classic formulation of society in these terms put forward by Durkheim, society is thing-like, and in this way it has the same degree of objectivity and reality as the world of nature. Structures and institutions empirically exist as themselves and this existence is recognizable and observable in the causal determination and constraint that they impose on social life as they regulate forms which this life, relationships and action take on even to the point of dictating the consciousness of its members. Culture, then, is actively produced by structure and is structurally organized in society at an institutional level. Society, then, can largely be conceptualized as a system of social relationships that is structurally, institutionally and culturally organized in terms of its internal constitution in material, historical and political conditions of its genesis and functioning. Consequently, society can be investigated scientifically as the natural sciences do the world of nature, i.e. objectively through theoretically informed empirical investigation of its structures and institutions which explain them causally and functionally in terms of their empirical characteristics and the conditions which determine this. Positivistic sociologies, then, are premised upon a conception of society which characterizes it as an object world which is external to its members. It is a world of what Durkheim calls social facts that exist in their own right and are subject to their own conditions and organization. On this basis, sociology and its methods of enquiry as well as its explanations are no different from any other science and, ultimately, the aim of sociology like that of science would be to produce a system of high-level, empirically grounded theoretical propositions about the social world which would provide the basis for predictive statements about social phenomena. Within this positivistic framework, of course, much more moderate statements about the scientific capacity of sociology exist too, which focus on a more limited and less totalistic form of historical and empirical enquiry into social structures and institutions and their causal and functional organization and development.

SUBJECT/OBJECT

However, the sense of their objective existence as facts which are materially, politically and culturally organized and not intersubjectively constituted at the level of meaning and action alone remains central to this form of sociology. It does not seek to establish a primarily qualitative investigation of social life, although it does entail an investigation of the role that interests, ideas and values play in social activities, but they are treated in terms of their structural location and institutional organization. Positivism, then, creates an essentially structural sociology and, in its ultimate form, it seeks quantitative evidence as the most reliable basis of explanation of the structure and conditions of society.

However, idealism and positivism in their absolute forms pose extremes of subjectivism, which specific sociologists working within either of the two traditions embrace in different ways and to a different extent simply because they face – and ultimately do so empirically – the reality of the social organization of social relationships (Ryan 1970). Society is not only conditioned and structured materially but also enacted by its members consciously and subjectively as actors within it who are agents in respect of their lives. Consequently the objectivity of society extends beyond the intersubjectivity of the social relationships within it since they are framed within and constrained by its material and institutional formations. Yet society is not simply an objective and external world for its members, because social organization and social relationships are ultimately realized in practice by them, and this is done with reference to the sense they have of them and their capacity for action within them in the light of their interests, values and motives in relation to them. Subject and object, then, are mutually interrelated as the social structures of society are played out in action, and action is played out within social structures. This in turn provides for a degree of open-endedness in the shaping and development of both, but the interplay has a social constitution to it – only this sociality is conscious and cultural as well as materially structured. Consequently, the character of the sociological analysis of explanation of society need not be posed as entirely an issue of either qualitative interpretation or hard-nosed science through a subject–object divide. Empirical analysis, which is the hallmark of scientific investigation and explanation generally, can and must be brought to bear upon the study of social relationships in terms of a variety of levels and types of enquiry, since it is empirical evidence which has to be used to sustain both the understanding and the interpretation of the social world and ultimately validates the explanations which sociology generates about it. This then may require different strategies depending on what social phenomenon is being investigated and the complexity of the levels on and in terms of which it exists. For example, Merton's functional analysis of corrupt political power shows how the American Constitution clashes with the need for the concentration of power by the government of a complex society: this the political boss ensures through the manipulation of political patronage and voting in a world of disparate communities.

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

Merton's analysis squares with Whyte's participant and interactionist study of a slum district of Boston which shows how political corruption thrives in the ways in which the material needs of the members of the community and the possibilities of their social advancement depend on political power and the advantages which accrue to it in the American political and social world. Electoral alliances and pork-barrel politics are the essence of how government funding and legislation are directed towards the distribution of central resources to communities, and there is only a very rudimentary form of welfare state which cannot compensate for the advantages of political patronage as far as the satisfaction of community and individual needs is concerned. So the institutional structure of American society which Merton addresses relates to Whyte's investigation of the way in which, in a particular community, social life is organized at an interactional level between the people within it, and treats this in terms of the interests of its members and the interpersonal basis on which they pursue them and makes this central to an understanding of the nature and existence of the community as a social world.

POSITIVISTIC AND OBJECTIVIST SOCIOLOGIES

The classic formulation of the positivistic conception of sociology is to be found in the early work of Durkheim. Durkheim argues for a view of society which treats it as a reality in its own right which is essentially external to and constraining upon its individual members and which he specifically distinguishes from the psychological and biological levels of human existence. It consists of typical ways of action and thinking which are, because of the external constraint which they exercise upon the social behaviour of individuals, real forces and phenomena with a thing-like character. Society is essentially objective in nature and consists of social facts which exist not only as the material, political and organizational structure of social relationships but also as the institutionalized moral and symbolic system of society, i.e. its collective consciousness of common beliefs, values and norms. Through its material and cultural organization, the social relations of society are structured and regulated and solidarity is produced between its members which gathers them into a community, initially through a completely determining and shared common culture within a segmental social structure (mechanical solidarity) and later, as societies become more complex in the process of social development, through the social division of labour which creates a society of functional relationships of interdependence between its members (organic solidarity).

Individuals enter into and participate in this external order not only through the subjection of their lives to its organization but also through a process of socialization in which the beliefs, values and rules of society are

internalized to create a self-constraint that mirrors the external constraint of society and its structures and institutions. So, individuals become social inhabitants of society through these processes of social determination, although, as Durkheim points out, the division of labour in complex societies creates individuality through the specialization of tasks within it that separates and distinguishes people from one another as they engage in them. But still this individuality is socially established by society and, as it meshes in the unique psychological and biological characteristics of the individual, needs to be controlled by society in order to preserve communal existence from the threat of individual egotism. Quite clearly then, the subjective *per se* is rejected in Durkheim's account of the conditions and existence of society which have objective foundation in its structural, institutional and normative organization as social facts.

Moreover, and precisely because social facts are real in terms of their thing-like character, Durkheim argues that they can be systematically studied through the empirical observation of their characteristics as facts and explained in terms of their causal determination and their functions for society. They are, in this sense, no different from the facts of nature and, just as the natural sciences study and explain them, so sociology is able to do the same and in the same way, i.e. sociology is a science. But to do this the common-sense preconceptions of society which its members hold must be abandoned in favour of the empirical observation of social facts themselves. This, for Durkheim, is the first rule of all scientific investigation, but Durkheim's positivism means, of course, that the rule is used to eliminate the subjective element of social life, i.e. the actual meanings, motives and purposes in terms of which the members of society act as agents within it. Instead the issue of meaning is treated in terms of the social structural determination of human consciousness by the epistemological and normative belief system of the society in which they live – a position which structuralism in late-twentieth-century sociologies adopts too.

The problem of this objectivist conception of society surfaces clearly and empirically, however, in Durkheim's positivistic study of suicide. He argues that suicide is a social fact because the official statistics on it show that there is a suicide rate which is a stable and regular occurrence within society and its social groupings, and therefore suicide is a typical form of human behaviour which therefore must be social. So he discounts the motivation of the individual as the real explanation for suicide and sets out to demonstrate instead that it is the nature of the social groupings to which the individual belongs (the family, religion, etc.) and his/her relation to them (the degree and kind of integration of the individual into the group) which causes it. It is society through its structural conditions and organizations which generates suicide, and it does so on a determinate basis because of the nature and workings of these conditions and organizations. But this opens up two objections to Durkheim's entirely positivistic account of

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

suicide. The first is, why do only certain of the individuals who are subject to the same group life and social conditions commit suicide? Surely only the motivation of the individual explains this? But more, suicide is also a social phenomenon in a different way from that in which Durkheim treats it. Suicide is also a culturally formed way of distinguishing, describing and explaining a particular kind of death (matter of social meaning too) which has to be invoked in every instance in which a potential suicide has occurred to make sense of it as suicide. This process of invocation and explanation is undertaken by coroners' courts which arrive at a verdict about a death as suicide by using expert and lay witnesses to reconstruct the circumstances of the death and the intentions of the victim. In this the culture's version of what kind of death a suicide is and how it occurs is central to establishing the fact of suicide, and official statistics are the product of this process of reconstruction. Suicide is not just a thing-like fact but a meaningful event, and the intentionality of the victim to kill himself/herself is central to the social meaning of suicide. The empirical and statistical investigation of suicide to establish social causes is not enough. The meaningful nature of social life, which is part of the nature of the social relationships which form society, cannot then be pushed entirely aside in favour of objective social structures, organization and institutions, because ultimately these have to be enacted. An argument about the structural nature of culture and consciousness which incorporates the individual through socialization and internalization cannot handle the agency of the members of society in their actions and the intentionality of their consciousness as they act in terms of ideas, values, purposes, interests, motives, etc. Action cannot be read off from structures, however constraining they are, because they are objectively and subjectively composed.

This problem arises again in functionalist sociology which, although it examines social structures and institutions in more specifically cultural terms and at the level of their functions rather than their causation, preserves an essentially objectivistic conception of society formulated as a system of socially structured and institutionalized relationships. Functionalism still seeks a positivistic science of society but now the model of the natural sciences which it draws upon is taken from biology, as befits a conception of society as an organized unity (society as a social system) which is located within an environment to which its structures and institutions are adapted culturally in terms of how they function on the basis of their reciprocal interdependence upon and with one another. So structures and institutions are internally adapted to one another too in the same way as and in relation to how the system is adapted as a totality to its environment.

Talcott Parsons provides the most elaborate account of society as a social system in which the structures and institutions of society emerge and function in relation to: an environment of material resources; the organizational necessities and legitimation requirements of the distribution of

SUBJECT/OBJECT

material and symbolic rewards to the members of society in exchange for their conformity with its dictates; and the psychological and biological needs and dispositions of its members which have to be met through their tailoring to socially determined outlets and satisfactions. This environment represents the conditions which shape the existence of society in the sense that human relationships can only become organized on a social basis (and society become established) in so far as structures and institutions emerge which deal with the environment by functionally resolving the problems that they pose. So society must establish economic structures and institutions which create a material basis for its existence by utilizing scarce material resources; political structures and institutions which govern and direct their allocation to its members; ideological structures and institutions which legitimate this allocation and produce an active acceptance of it on the part of its members; and structures and institutions of socialization which incorporate individuals into society as social creatures engaging in social behaviour. These different spheres of social organization are functionally interrelated to form a system, since ultimately they have to work together with one another, as the social conformity of the members of society on which social life depends can only be achieved if the psychological and biological needs of its members are satisfied through the social rewards it offers them in exchange for conformity. This depends on society being able to reward its members both materially and symbolically through the production and allocation of these resources in a way that is governmentally organized and ideologically legitimated, so that in the final analysis the process of socialization through which social conformity is created can be achieved successfully.

So society is an objective reality which consists of a system of functionally interrelated structures and institutions which direct and organize social life and into which its individuals are socialized. The functional logic of the system determines what society is, how it works, and what is the nature of the structures and institutions through which it does this. As the heart of this system, and as the basis of how its structure and institutions are formed and articulated and its members incorporated into it as social actors acting in terms of them, is a common value system. This is the important place that functionalism gives to culture in its account of society. This acts as a normative order of ideas, beliefs, values and norms through which the structural and institutional roles that individuals occupy in society are regulated, controlled and accepted so that social relationships are created and maintained in this way. Society, then, is an objective world of ordered relationships between its members in which that order has been produced functionally, is maintained consensually and ultimately rests upon its determination as a necessity for the survival of society. Societies vary because their culture, structures and institutions represent different functional and adaptive solutions to the environment in which they are placed, but all are social systems and, as systems, are

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

organized in terms of systemic universal nature, character and logic. The scientific task of sociology is to empirically investigate how social structure and institutions function within the total system of society in relation to one another and the environment within which the society is located. So, for example, Talcott Parsons has argued that the nuclear family is its universal institutional form in modern complex industrial societies because it is functionally adapted to an industrial economy which requires geographical and social mobility and separates work from the home, thereby distinctively gendering men and women into the performance of two primary kinds of activity: instrumental activity (work and men) and expressive activity (the home and women). This instrumental expressive divide is both necessary and complementary since it guarantees the economic survival of the family through the husband's work and its domestic organization through the work of the wife, and together this makes it an effective agent of socialization for children.

That the functionality of social institutions in relation to the wider society of which they are part cannot be denied is a major contribution of functional sociology to the explanation of social life, and functionalism is able to demonstrate that structures and institutions do have an objective reality and that how and why they work in fact has to do with their functionality in relation to social needs and the organization of the other structures and institutions of society. That the particular gendering of social roles which has occurred in the modern industrial world has major effects on women and their place in it, which feminism has demonstrated, does not entirely destroy functionalist arguments about how this has come about. The issue is whether the scientific analysis of the structures and institutions by functionalism in terms of their necessity for the survival of society conceals a ideological celebration of these structures and institutions, because it ignores other possible forms of social organization that could also be functional. And it ignores an alternative but necessary part of a cogent explanation of the structures and institutions of society that examines their historical, political and material causation as well as their functions. Moreover, in addressing society in terms of functional interdependence of its institutions and the normative ordering of society on a consensual basis, functionalism ignores the conflicts and contradictions between structures and institutions (between bureaucracy and democratic government) and disguises the cultural and normative diversity in society that arises with respect to the different social groups and the conflicts and power struggles between them with regard not only to beliefs and values but also to the distribution of symbolic rewards in society. The social order which functionalism proclaims is far from being a consensual order or a completely stable organization of social relationships.

But this raises again the problem of treating society as though it was only an objective and systemic world of structures and institutions in which the agency of its members is simply a matter of determination by them.

Ultimately the scientific explanation of society which is offered by functionalism rests on the argument that action within it is determined by rules and roles in terms of their institutionalized integration with one another, in which socialization into them through internalization is the key to the way in which the members of society come to participate in it on a socially determined basis. Yet an empirical inspection of rules and roles shows that the enactment of the latter in terms of the governance of the former is much more complex than this. Rules can only come to govern action through their interpretation, and roles can only be enacted in the light of this, so ultimately social action depends on this process of interpretation by its members in which they have to take decisions about how to enact social roles and engage in social relationships. Of course this is done against a background of the structural constraints of institutions and institutional settings, not in an automatic fashion but in terms of a sense of what the institution and the purposes, rules and activities are; what the constraints are that impose themselves in these terms and need to be attended to on a practical level; how much scope there is to negotiate action within the situation, and what it would be appropriate to negotiate; and what kind of private or other interests can be served or satisfied within an institutional context. All of this is bound to the contingencies and exigencies of day-to-day existence within the social world which, however orderly, regular and normal are the forms which life takes within it, still has to be encountered on a daily basis and recognized and dealt with as such, which means, in part, routinizing it. It is the processes though which the members of society constantly routinize their world and the actions within it, however much they do this on a taken-for-granted basis, that functionalism ignores in its analysis of the social purposes, values and motives that are entailed on the part of the members of society as they go about their daily lives. The objective forms of culture and structure have to be activated to become the determinants of the organization of society and action within it.

But this, then, raises another primary issue about the objectivity of structures and institutions, which is the issue of power as opposed to culture and meaning. This is central to Marxism and its discussion of social action within society and the possibilities of the agency of the subject in terms of this. For Marx, society emerges in terms of social action but at the level of the social organization of the production of the material conditions of human life. So the mode of production and the material forces on which it is based are the foundation of society and they produce an organized system of structural and institutional social relationships between the members of society which determines the interests and actions of the participants as they enter the system. So human action is understood by Marx in terms of its productive nature and by virtue of the means and mode of its organization. In this sense, then, society is an objective and material reality which exists at the level of the structures and institutions arising from the mode of production which emerges historically in terms of

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

the different means on which it is based and the different forms which it takes. Furthermore, the material and social organization of the mode of production generates a cultural and institutional superstructure of ideas and beliefs, legal and political institutions, etc. which reflect and sustain the mode of production and the organization of social relationships which it engenders.

Consciousness, subjectivity and human agency, then, are largely subordinated by Marx to labour and the act of production which, although they entail creative engagement on the part of the labourer, are practically and socially determined by the organization of production; the social relations this generates between producers; the interests and purposes which the productive relationships create for the producers as they are located within them; and the cultural organization of social consciousness at the level of ideas and values that is established in terms of these interests and purposes. The point for Marx is that in so far as the social organization of the mode of production entails the private ownership of the means of production, it creates social relations of domination and subordination between the producers in terms of this ownership and the power which accrues to it. So every mode of production produces a class structure consisting of a ruling class and a subordinate class which determines the interests of each class and structures the relations between them in terms of power and conflict. The culture of a society emerges as a representation and distillation of these interests in which a dominant culture is created by the ruling class by virtue of its economic position and power and which is an ideological reflection of its interests and position. This is the major role assigned to institutionalized forms of social consciousness by Marx which legitimates and underpins the whole material and social order on which the society is based. In capitalism, the mode of production is based upon labour power and its use to manufacture commodities for profit through their sale within the marketplace. In the capitalist mode of production labour is itself commodified and manufacture entails the extraction of surplus value from its use to create profit. The result, then, is the emergence of a class structure in which a ruling class, the bourgeoisie, own labour power and the profit which is produced through its use in the form of capital and property, and a subordinate class, the proletariat, who live through the sale of their labour under conditions of exploitation and alienation by virtue of its commodification and private appropriation by the bourgeoisie as capital and profit. This, in turn, is institutionalized in a legal and political superstructure which transforms the economic position of the bourgeoisie into a position of power, government and control over society, and a dominant culture of ideas, beliefs and values which performs the ideological function of legitimating the system and their position within it by justifying and disguising the economic and power relations on which it is based and the conditions of exploitation and alienation to which it reduces the proletariat, whose labour is the absolute foundation of the creation of wealth and profit in the

capitalist mode of production. Capital and private property, then, which are the heart of capitalism, depend on the commodification, exploitation and alienation of labour on which they are based, according to Marx; and in this sense, capitalism is an inhuman system that denies its members the right to engage in and enjoy the fruits of their labour on a creative and socially co-operative basis.

Now it is in terms of this materialist conception of society as a system of objective and objectified relationships that Marx attempts to establish a scientific sociology which investigates them in empirical terms. However it is, as Marx argues, a dialectical science as opposed to mere positivism, although its empiricism has a positivistic basis. It is dialectical in two senses. Firstly, it is a scientific analysis based in a project for the revolutionary transformation of capitalism to socialism in which the theoretical and empirical investigation of capitalism is designed to act as a critical and real foundation and tool of a political practice which overthrows capitalism and replaces it with socialism. In this it sides with the proletariat and the alienated and exploited life which they lead and treats them, because of the primary role of their labour in capitalist manufacture, as the necessary social agent of revolution since the conditions in which the proletariat exist are the universal and negative conditions of human and social life within capitalism. A new and co-operative organization of the collective forces of labour that capitalism has produced through industrial manufacture, once it has broken the chains of private property and been placed in the hands of the labour force itself, opens instead a classless and human world which is free of exploitation and subordination. Secondly, Marx's analysis is dialectical because it treats society as a totality (system) of interrelated and interpenetrating structures, institutions, relationships and action (albeit stemming from the mode of production) that exists in terms of a dynamic of the contradictions as well as the integration between them, which constantly transforms their nature in terms of revolution as the forces of production change. In the consequent development of new modes of production, new and different classes and structures of ownership and power are created; new class conflicts emerge and are fought within society. All history, as Marx puts it, is the history of class conflict, and therein lies the role of human agency in social life; but it is an agency bound to class, class interests and class conflict which changes in terms of the forces of production, the emergence of new modes of production and contradictions within the mode of production.

It is in this latter sense that Marx's science is positivistic, since it treats society as an objective and real system of structures and institutions that are ultimately lodged in and created by the social organization of production. The subject and human agency emerge practically in relation to this system, and the potential for action on the part of the members of society is shaped and determined by the possibilities of life which it creates. The power that human beings have to create their world lies not in their consciousness *per*

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

se or their individuality but in the collective and practical reorganization of structures and institutions. This too must be done structurally and institutionally to create a new social order of structures and institutions that are essentially communal, albeit ones that may liberate the creative capacities of the individual in terms of the ways in which participation in society is organized and the needs of its members are satisfied. The problem here is that Marxism lacks a theory of the subject because of its commitment to the essential sociality of human life and its critique of bourgeois individualism in capitalism as nothing but a commodification of the person in terms of the ownership of private property which simply extends it to the subject. A sense of what the real subject may be is offered in terms of the creative and unalienated nature of human labour as the essential property of being human, but its collective and social organization remains the central issue for Marx and he locates the human being of human beings in this sociality of labour and production. But also and specifically, too, Marx is scientific in a positivistic manner in terms of the empirical analysis that he conducts into the capitalist system in terms of a distinction between its essence, which is the real organization of its productive relationships, and the structure and institutions of social life which this creates through the commodification of labour at the level of class property and power and the appearance of capitalism. The latter is the dominant idealized and ideological cultural form in which it represents, legitimates and disguises its own exploitative and alienated world as an essential, natural and just form of society; and, through the taken-for-granted acceptance of this dominant culture by the members of society, capitalism both creates their allegiance to it and incorporates them into it as participants who accept their position in it. But it is the scientific and empirical investigation of capitalism which is used to reveal the real structures and institutions of which it consists, and this is how Marx claims to demonstrate its essential nature and so breaks with its ideological appearances. In this sense Marx, like Durkheim, rejects the common sense of the members of society as the necessary condition for a scientific, empirical and objective enquiry that is based upon facts, but facts that provide the empirical and theoretical foundation for a revolutionary political practice in Marx's case. As Marx puts it himself, his socialism is a scientific socialism and not a philosophical and humanistic socialism. Positivism and dialectics fuse in Marx.

Now this distinction between essence and appearance in terms of the treatment of society as a system of social relationships, in which the former is the objective reality of society and the latter is the subjective and cultural representations of itself (the social consciousness) that are structurally produced by and generated within it, is the core of structuralism and structuralist sociology. In this sociology the subject as a person endowed with consciousness, and as an agent of action acting individually or socially in society, disappears altogether. Instead it is the system which is real, but not in the classic empiricist sense of its reality, i.e. simply as a matter of

mere observational evidence. Instead reality is understood in terms of the concealed but underlying and structured way that the system generates itself as a system and which produces the institutions, social formations and culture of which it is composed. It is this underlying reality of the system which a structuralist and realist science is directed towards investigating, in terms of how the system composes institutions, social formations and culture through the dynamics of the relations between them which the system creates and which has its own logic of ordering and change. In the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, his structuralism seizes upon the later work of Durkheim on the moral and symbolic ordering of society by its institutionalized collective consciousness and the semiotic linguistics of Saussure to treat society like a language which has an underlying grammar as rules of organization that determine its social formations and relationships but on a cultural basis. This social and cultural grammar is a grammar of mythology which has its foundation in the universal nature of the human mind itself. All societies are organized through an enculturation in terms of a dominant mythology which, as the collective consciousness and symbolic knowledge of society, generates a collective sense and meaning of human existence for the members of society which structures and institutionalizes their social relationships in particular forms that organize the conditions and resolve the problems which human life and the world of nature entail. All mythologies have the same basis and logic to them in which culture and structure match and mesh and which is synchronic rather than diachronic in its character, so all societies can be understood in terms of how their social relationships are embodied in and organized through the mythological structuring of them by the culture of society, and so society can be explained in terms of how it works on this basis. The individual in society, then, is subjected to and incorporated into it not as a subject in his or her own right who engages consciously in society as an active agent, but as a subject whose subjectivity and consciousness have been unconsciously and collectively determined and constituted by the culture of society, which is a structure that imposes itself on the individual and comes from society. It is society which acts and not the individual, and its action lies in its symbolic organization.

Lévi-Strauss's structuralism is ideational but nevertheless society is objective and real. In Althusser structuralism is now given a materialist character and derives from a realist-structuralist reinterpretation of Marx and the scientific analysis of capitalism in terms of the distinction Marx makes between its essence and its appearance, in which the former is the focus of enquiry and the basis of Marx's explanation of its nature. Althusser treats this scientific analysis of capitalism by Marx as the basis of the objectivity and validity of Marxism and argues that it rests on the recognition by Marx that capitalism is a system of production that generates and organizes the social relationships, social formations and culture of which it is composed in terms of the underlying reality and logic of that system. The

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

scientific and structuralist task for Althusser is to uncover the reality and its logic in terms of the relationships that are generated between production, institutional and social formations and culture and the ways in which they sustain, underpin and contradict one another. In this Althusser moves beyond a simple base/superstructure model of the capitalist system to show how it operates at important interrelated and different levels, in which the state apparatus of capitalist society as it exists in the judiciary, bureaucracy etc. works as coercive management and control of social relationships in favour of its productive and social organization, but in conjunction with the ideological apparatus of society which works through a dominant culture absorbing individuals by shaping and determining their consciousness and incorporating them into it on an unconscious basis so they willingly occupy the positions that the capitalist mode of production has assigned to them. There is, then, no subject as agent in Althusser's structuralist account of capitalism because consciousness and action are structured by society through its institutionalized and ideologically generated culture which is part of its systemic nature. Society is real, the individual is not. The problem, of course, is that in so far as Marxism is a revolutionary position the revolution is left to the breakdown of the capitalist system through its inherent contradictions and the opportunities offered by the objectivity of a scientific analysis of it. But there are no subjects here to organize the revolution and carry it through since Althusser's position denies the possibility of action which depends upon a subject who can be a self-conscious agent of action as opposed to being a vehicle of the collective cultural consciousness. If Althusser's science offers a way out of ideology to revolution it does so through theory and an elitism which leaves the common person trapped in an unconscious collectivism from which there is no form of release in action, because action is stifled by an inevitable and determined incorporation of the individual into the structures of capitalism in which they have no reality and identity as actual subjects and agents. But this is the general problem faced by systemic Marxism of any variety, be it of Marx himself or not.

Precisely because of this Gramsci seeks to offer a different sense of Marx which attempts to restore and emphasize the position of human agency, action, consciousness and culture in its analysis of the capitalist system and the ways in which the system works. Gramsci argues that capitalism, however much it is organized institutionally and structurally at the level of production, depends also upon the ways in which these institutions and structures are institutionalized, legitimized and enshrined in a dominant and hegemonic culture which, as it becomes taken for granted within society as common sense, preserves the status quo. Moreover, Gramsci argues that the development of a hegemonic culture is an absolutely central part of capitalism and its survival which it achieves through economic negotiations between capital, labour and parliamentary government which entails some sharing of power on the part of the ruling class. Revolution

SUBJECT/OBJECT

can begin only by the proletariat challenging the dominant cultural apparatus to form a consciousness of its own in relation to its conditions within the capitalist system: the proletariat must become agents for revolution to succeed, and only the development of social consciousness on their part provides for this.

Revolutionary action requires collective and political organization. Culture is the arena of critique and struggle for Gramsci and not just a structural, collective and unconscious determinant of subjectivity which incorporates people into capitalist society on a socially constituted, determined and robotic basis. In this Gramsci cites Marx's argument that the revolutionary project depends on class as a form of economic position (class in itself) becoming politically conscious and organized (class for itself), and systemic Marxism completely objectivizes the structures and institutions of society and further reduces them to the material organization of its productive system and the class relationship it generates. But Gramsci too is caught in this, and he leaves no space for other forms of the social organization of action such as politics and administration, government, status, gender and ethnicity. Social action in society has many sources, which is not to deny how structures and institutions condition it, but they are varied in their nature; and the fact that the members of society are grouped and group themselves culturally in their actions in terms of them, and differently so, suggests empirically that any version of society as a system overdraws its objectivity and underestimates social and cultural differentiation and agency within it. It presumes a determined incorporation of the members of society into its structures and institutions which their enactment belies, since these depend for their effect, however much they are taken for granted and lived within by the members of society, on the ways in which members attend to and make sense of them on a practical and conscious basis.

IDEALIST, SUBJECTIVIST AND INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGIES

From the critique of positivistic sociology it follows, then, that it is necessary to turn to the issues raised about the nature of social reality by subjectivist and interpretive sociologies. These focus their concern upon action and consciousness, i.e. on the subjective and intersubjective nature of social relationships and the ways in which society and its structures and institutions are to be understood and explained in terms of their organization on this basis.

Weber's sociology of action establishes the foundation of subjectivist sociology, and with it the conception of sociology as an interpretive science; but distinctively his science of action entails a marriage with positivism because of its commitment to the causal explanation of action

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

which makes this the basis of its objectivity. However, for Weber, what society consists of factually is the actions and interactions of individuals which are subjectively meaningful to them in the sense that they are consciously conducted and organized purposively on the basis of the ideas, interests, values and purposes of the actors themselves. Society emerges as subjective meanings develop historically and collectively and become institutionalized intersubjectively on a cultural basis to produce a mutual orientation towards one another on the part of the members of society that structures their relationships with one another on an interactive basis. For Weber, then, it is not that society has no material sources of its organization – it has these in the historical, economic, political, administrative, etc. conditions and factors which are part of its causal development – but that the institutions created in society, however material, are always organized and operative in society at the level of the conscious and meaningful actions of individuals out of which they are really composed. It follows for Weber that the explanation of the social must be based on an internal understanding of the subjective meaning of action, which differentiates the methodology of sociology from the natural sciences. The latter proceed on the basis of the external observation of the facts of nature, which have no meaning in themselves, unlike the facts of society which are meaningful actions and where the object which is society lies in its cultural and material constitution through intersubjective relationships. But for Weber, understanding remains merely the hypothetical interpretation of action until its meaning can be verified and translated into an objective explanation of it, and this is a matter of establishing its causal determination in terms of subjective meaning. And here the positivism enters into Weber's interpretive science of action.

Weber argues that the meaning of action cannot be understood simply on the basis of an empathetic grasp of the actor's position by the sociological observer, because this substitutes emotion for objectivity. Instead the sociological observer must seek a rational understanding of action – an understanding which is objective because it is verifiable – and the causal canons of scientific explanation must be brought into play to do this. This means treating action as purposively organized by the actor in terms of a means-ends relationship in which the meaning of the action can be understood on the basis of how it is motivated by the way in which the actor selectively chooses ends and adopts certain means for their achievement within a situation. Action, then, is capable of objective explanation because it is tested and verified by the empirical observation of the actual course which it takes to see if this latter matches the observer's understanding of it. Consequently the study of action, albeit through the understanding of its motivation, proceeds in terms of the normal scientific procedure of the construction and empirical testing of causal hypotheses about it. But ultimately for the purposes of its scientific explanation this depends on the rational and causal conceptualization of its nature, and that Weber provides

in terms of seeing it as organized on a means–ends basis so that different types can be distinguished from which to construct hypotheses about and explicate the reality of particular concrete actions in the social world. These types are ideal types of action which distinguish them in terms of the particular form of the organization of the means–ends relationship which they entail and which provide and clarify the basis on which particular and concrete actions can be understood and explained. Ultimately Weber goes on to argue that different societies have culturally and institutionally organized their social structures and relationships around and in terms of one or more of these particular forms of action: in Western society, it is the instrumentally rational form of action which dominates its structures and social relationships.

For Weber, science can be used to understand and objectively explain action because factually its subjectively meaningful nature consists in its causally motivated determination on a means–ends basis. But it remains an interpretive science because the explanation is one of probability rather than exactitude, and because the sociological observer's values determine what he or she wishes to grasp and understand about the historical formation and structural and cultural motivation and organization of action in the social world. Nevertheless, fact interposes between values and explanation in the form of empirical evidence as the basis of the understanding of meaning, and of causality as the basis of the explanation of action; the problem is whether the rationality of scientific explanation of action can be accepted altogether. Essentially Weber's science of action insists that its intelligibility (meaning) and explicability (causation) lie in its purposive organization on a means–ends basis. But this makes science the arbiter of its meaning and determination, since the ideal-typical formulation of concrete actions in these terms assumes forms of means–ends organization that are scientifically formulated rather than culturally determined and imposes them on the latter organization of action. And this is precisely where phenomenological sociology departs from Weber's science of action.

The issue for phenomenological sociology is not the positivistic empirical investigation of action but the examination of the social basis of its organization at the level of meaning which raises the relevance of a positivistic and causal science to its explanation. It moves, then, much more specifically to the subjective and intersubjective nature of social life and a sociology which is precisely directed to this. In this it joins hands with symbolic interactionism, and both offer a version of sociology whose theories and explanations seek to ground themselves in the empirical character of the social relationships of everyday life as it is actually lived by the members of society.

For phenomenology, human existence has its foundation in the consciousness through which human beings make sense of and act within the world. Through consciousness experience of the world is given meaning, and through this the world is typified and constructed as a taken-for-

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

granted and real world of facts and events in terms of which the individual can engage in action on an individual and purposive basis in the light of their biographical situation within it. In this way the actions of the individual become subjectively meaningful to that individual, and this organizes the way in which they are conducted on an individual basis. The ordinary and everyday consciousness of the individual is not entirely solitary in its nature but entails the sense that it inhabits a world which is shared with other individuals who understand and factually experience it in reality in the same way, so that social relations can be and are created and sustained between individual actors on the same basis. So society emerges through the way in which social relationships are constituted and organized by a shared sense of the world, which is intersubjective and commonsensical in nature and which constructs and establishes the social world as a real world of facts, situations and events which are accepted as common in a taken-for-granted manner by the members of society by virtue of this shared sense of their nature. Social reality as fact, then, is actually constructed by common-sense reasoning, and this is embodied in and uses ordinary language which then acts as the foundation of a common and social consciousness. Using language, the members of society are able to describe and typify their world and its events and scenes in the same way and so experience it as a reality in the same terms as one another. So they organize their actions and relationships on a reciprocal and social basis through what their common sense takes social reality to be – and so it is for the members of society – the objective and factual social environment (society) in which they live. So society is indeed an objective, real communal world for its members, but it is actually constituted from within it on an intersubjective basis by its members through the use of common-sense knowledge, as embodied in language, which they share with one another and bring to bear on one another's actions and social scenes so as to understand and conduct their social life. Society, then, has its foundation in a common culture (common-sense knowledge) which has its own way of making sense of the events and scenes of the social world and actions within it. This gives it a distinctive rationality of its own which organizes and constructs them in its own terms on a practical day-to-day basis. Social structure, then, lies in how the members of a society organize (i.e. structure) their world socially in these terms. And in doing this they are constantly engaged in a process of describing, defining and negotiating the nature of the social scenes of society, and conducting their actions and interactions within them in this way. The social world is produced and organized by their own communal and sense-making activity.

However, the way in which the social world is constructed, organized and negotiated in terms of common-sense knowledge by its members goes unnoticed by them because they treat that knowledge positivistically and unreflexively as fact about social reality and not as constitutive of the facts

of social reality. The task of sociology then becomes one of an empirical and reflexive enquiry into the social construction of social reality, which abandons the common-sense view of the social world as fact to examine how its facticity is established by common-sense knowledge itself. In this sociology seeks to understand and explicate how the members of society actually utilize common-sense reasoning and go about the business of constructing their social world as they make sense of its scenes and events and as they act in it on a day-to-day basis. It is concerned then with the practices and practicalities of social organization of society as this is enacted in the socially meaningful activities of its members, in which their sense of the world is the key to its understanding and examination and not the causal rationality of a positivistic science which imposes its own framework of organization and determination upon their activities in terms of society as the external and objective conditions of action within it.

But, in doing so, phenomenology (and symbolic interaction) goes too far in a subjectivist direction. It is true, of course, that social structures and institutions ultimately depend on their enactment for their existence and the strength of the subjectivist position consists of showing how such are articulated from within on the basis of common-sense knowledge in terms of the negotiation and definition of social situations and practical decision-making within them. Social action has, then, a meaningful, subjective and purposive character. But social structures and institutions are not simply reducible to the intersubjective relationships and actions of which they are composed, because they do impose external and objective constraints upon those relationships in terms of the forms in which they have become institutionalized and which have emerged historically on the basis of material, economic, political, technological, administrative, etc. conditions and are sustained in and by the various relationships that structures and institutions enjoy with one another in particular societies. It is the strength of Weber's position to recognize this need for a causal and historical explanation of action and society as well as an examination of its internal constitution at the level of an understanding of culture and meaning. The point is that culture and consciousness have a societal and structural location and action within society emerges in the reflexive and causal engagement between consciousness and structure. Neither the subjectivity of the individual nor the structural conditions of society in themselves determine human action. Objectivist sociologies enshrine the important point about the relationship of consciousness and action, which is how the social location of both means that the content of the consciousness of the individual is largely social, is unconsciously absorbed from society and operates at a taken-for-granted level. But phenomenological sociology makes a similar claim about common-sense knowledge and social action. Both show the reality of the social organization of society. The key question is what degree of agency is entailed in action and how it is achieved.

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

THE POSTMODERN TURN IN SOCIOLOGY

With postmodernism the whole subject/object debate is abandoned on the grounds that it belongs to and with a mode of thinking and a world order, that of modern society, which no longer exists because the whole world has been radically transformed and reconstituted in terms of a new type of society and culture. Modern society from this point of view is seen as a highly differentiated society structurally in which the capitalist economy dominated, and it is characterized by a complex division of labour, industrialization and urbanization, science and technology, and cultural and ideological values which emphasize political and ethical individualism and a sense of society as a total community which is bound together by a social contract between its members. Modern society, conceived in these terms, is seen as giving rise to sociology and the social sciences generally by establishing the method, interests and agenda for them as an Enlightenment programme which seeks to extend the uses of reason – especially in terms of science, technology and applied science – to promote the growth of a rational civilization. As such sociology, as it has been traditionally conceived, has developed set ideas about the self, society and history, and it is the dominance of these which postmodernism rejects as essentially irrelevant to an analysis of the postmodern world.

These set ideas, as befits science, continuously trade off an absolutist and empiricist knowledge, a version of truth and rationality which science embodies and which distinguishes the objective and real (the rational) from the merely personal and subjective (the non-rational). Postmodernism claims that social science has sought to explain human nature and history and to provide, through that knowledge, the emancipatory means by which personal identity could emerge from instinct and need and be developed in terms of a conscious, purposive, integrated and determining self; society could be successfully organized and regulated in terms of communal and contractual relationships which mutually satisfied the interests of its members; and history could now become the progressive development of society in which human beings could take charge of their future. But this simply confuses the realities of identity, society and history with the rationalistic theories and explanations that science has produced about them in what is, in fact, an attempt to order and control them through science's own absolutist claims to knowledge about the world. But science is itself a socio-historically produced form of knowledge which is therefore culturally relative and constructionist in terms of the rationality with which it explains the world, and the facts which it detects about that world are secured through its own epistemological perspective upon it.

Instead, then, of the empirical certainties of the scientific and institutional structural analysis of society which sociology has traditionally set out to generate – which takes identity as a unified and conscious self, society as an orderly totality, and history as a progressive and determined path of

change and development – postmodernism offers a thoroughly historicized view of society. This locates society in the discontinuities of different forms of consciousness, identities, signification, organization, etc. which situate and are situated within a world of highly diversified cultural and social divisions and differences, i.e. an indeterminate and unstable world of heterogeneous groups, alternative social voices and multiple realities in which semiotic structures and cultural processes produce and reproduce organizations and economies of wealth, power and privilege in terms of the location and habitus of the social groupings within it. Culture, language, the sign and discursive practices are the hallmark of the postmodern world and its organizational, if disorganizing and fragmenting, basis. These are constructive of social existence and in that sense are material and real (i.e. objective) but are also ideational and in that sense subjective, not as subjective manifestations of consciousness but as the historico-social and linguistic orders and processes of signification – the structure and practice which create, as they subject and subjugate them, social identity and social reality.

In this context, the ideas of Baudrillard and Foucault have become particularly significant for postmodern sociology. According to Baudrillard, the postmodern world is no longer structured by production and economic exchange but by the symbolic exchange which new technologies and systems of information have created and which generates a heterogeneous cultural world of proliferating signs, images and significations which is inhabited by its members as consumers in relation to them. But signs themselves have now taken on a life of their own and become free-floating so that they replace reality by their own images and so become the primary determinants of social experience. This process, which Baudrillard refers to as a process of simulation, generates a world of hyper-reality in which social structures and boundaries dissolve into a black hole of signs, images, meanings and messages which, as they create social reality, also neutralize one another in a constant and conflicting flow of information urging its consumption on the part of the members of society. But the flood and flux of information which produces a social world of simulacra destroys the subject and human agency within it, since signs and images now control social practice and action can only generate more of the same and with no more claim on reality than any other images and signs and so contribute to the hyper-reality. But this is precisely what is problematic in Baudrillard's sociology. By relativizing science and the sociological tradition of structural enquiry, he is left only with culture and the sign and so is unable to analyse the far from disappearing and objective structural reality which is that of the political and economic organizations, social divisions, technological and administrative practices, etc. of the contemporary social world and which act as the social location for and the basis of signs and signification in society. This structural reality is a readily and demonstrably evident part of the contemporary social world: yet, of course, Baudrillard's whole analysis

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

is underpinned by a version of the underlying structure of the postmodern world in terms of a general technological determinism which focuses upon the place of information systems in its organization. The undoubtedly powerful position of information and the sign in the contemporary world and the role of consumption in the creation of identity and social differentiation and division is overdrawn, because Baudrillard has reduced social divisions of the contemporary world to a cultural diversity, difference and fragmentation that treat this world as having no other foundation. The resulting nihilism in relation to human action and agency depends precisely upon this reduction of the reality of structure to signification and the dissolution of the empirical which this entails, and it follows upon the way in which constructional and deconstructional analysis replaces any version of science and a rational and observational enquiry into the social world which treats it as having an existential and material foundation, which entails forms of symbolic representation as well as being entailed by them.

Foucault maintains the constructionist position, but in a specifically poststructuralist form. He moves away from Baudrillard's concern with the generative power of signs and images in the construction of the contemporary social world to its production through the forms of discipline and governmentality that it exercises. Therein lies its reality as society is organized through discursive practices, i.e. historically, politically and economically located epistemes. These are systems of thought and understanding of the world with their own rationality and which surface and concretize themselves socially as regimes and practices of the government and organization of self and social relationships and so produce society and social and personal existence within it. Discursive practices, then, are forms of power with their own determinative organization, and the epistemes which underpin them emerge historically in terms not of a process of continuous development but of discontinuities and disjunctions between them. There is no grand structural narrative to history in terms of which the contemporary world has developed or is developing, but only the history of its present form; and science is only the present and historically emergent episteme with its own organizational rationality and not an absolutely valid and universal form of knowledge. As such it constructs and produces the world through its discursive and governmental practices and regimes of power and organization.

For Foucault, the contemporary world can be understood as a carceral society based upon a moral technology of power and a government embodied in Enlightenment and scientific discourses and practices. This submits its members and their bodies to a constant regimentation induced through their minds on the basis of the objective, universal and moral claims of the rationality of science and the practices of governmentality which this creates in terms of the systematic regime of supervision, surveillance and discipline which it enforces on people in society. This regime

entails the regulation and scheduling of 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 both formally and informally to ensure their conformity. It is achieved by creating the docile person through the moral transformation of the individual into a hard-working, conscience-ridden and useful creature that fits the needs of production and warfare in a rational, efficient and technical society. And social science plays its part in this by generating scientific and rationalistic conceptions of normality with reference to identity and sociality that are implemented practically and professionally in the whole varieties of administrative, educational, therapeutic, etc. technologies through which social life is organized in the contemporary world. Moreover, the governmental regime claims the moral right to and does punish people who do not fit into its categories of normality on the grounds of truth claims that are embodied in scientific knowledge. But this disciplinary organization of contemporary society is anonymous, dispersed and comprehensive, and in that sense no one owns it but everyone is subject to it. There are no subjects in society because the individual has no inner essence but is socially conditioned and produced through the discursive technologies of the soul which society enforces on the individual in terms of normality and which the individual internalizes. So the contemporary world is one which differentiates, hierarchicalizes, marginalizes and excludes its members on these terms. Society lies in its governmentality; the governmentality of the contemporary world lies in the regime of carceral, anonymous and disciplinary power; and the members of society are not agents but products of this disciplinary organization which reaches into and forms their identities. This, for Foucault, is the nature of the contemporary social world and the real historical legacy of the Enlightenment and the rationalism of science as it developed from it. The promise of emancipation has turned into a nightmare of discipline and regimentation from which nothing and nobody can escape except through refusal and the deconstruction of the discourse and the rationality on which it is based. So Foucault recommends an archaeology and a genealogy which historically unearth and trace the origins and development of Enlightenment and scientific knowledge, which challenge its absolutist epistemological and moral claims, and which reject the disciplinary technologies of social engineering and normalization that it seeks to enforce.

The problem, however, is whether escape is possible given that Foucault has reduced science to mere discourse and power as opposed to understanding and knowledge; society to discursive formations which have no structural existence; and the subject to the regimented and normalized product of social and scientific technologies of the soul. But this is the empirical case, and in the end Foucault's analysis must stand or fall on evidence which makes it impossible to reject rational and scientific knowledge altogether as merely relativistic and socio-historical discourse, since he

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

is actually making an empirical claim about the nature of contemporary society which entails a demonstration of the truth and validity of this claim in terms of reality, and reality not just as an epistemological object.

And there lies the problem which postmodern constructionism does not overcome, however much it seeks to reformulate the issue of subject and object (i.e. self and society) in terms of the historical, cultural, linguistic, symbolic and discursive constitution, formation and organization of their nature. They are more than just this relativity, and obdurately exert an empirical existence that goes beyond construction. So whereas it is true that power may have become anonymized and decentralized in the contemporary world in a whole variety of ways, it is also true that it is socially located structurally in forms of the social division within society and the hierarchies of ownership and domination on which they are based and in its concentrations in the institutional organizations of society. Moreover, the interactional achievement of social life requires an enactment in terms of interest, purpose and consciousness, which, however social, must assume an autonomy of the self, which an argument about governmentality cannot encompass because it theorizes it out of existence in a sociology which does not empirically investigate what people actually do in society but constantly and analytically asserts what society does to them. For all of its commitment to relativity and difference, the natives are largely and empirically absent from the postmodern analysis of the world since the sociological analysts of this world have abrogated the native's right to speak in anything other than the analytical terms of construction and deconstruction which postmodern sociology has provided for them.

KEY CONCEPTS

SUBJECTIVISM Society as a subjective phenomenon in which the subject is the individual who is endowed with consciousness and acts in terms of his or her own ideas, values, interests and motives. So the reality of society lies in its nature as the intersubjective organization of relationships and interactions between individuals as subjects which is based on shared beliefs, values and motives.

OBJECTIVISM Society as an objective phenomenon whose reality consists of the structural and institutional organization of social relationships which determines and constrains the actions of the individual members of it and so shapes the nature of their subjectivity, ideas, values, motives and action.