

Introduction

Chris Jenks

This book contains an invitation and a welcome, not just to an academic subject but also to a way of thinking about the world. Sociology, which is the discipline that has brought us all together, has a relatively short history, yet it has had a significant and growing impact on the culture, thought styles and public policy of contemporary society. We need to ask how this could have occurred, and what forms this influence might have taken.

While teaching sociology at a variety of levels for over twenty-five years I, like so many of the contributors to this volume, have noticed that the character of everyday life has changed quite dramatically. During the past quarter of a century social life has transformed in many ways, and continues to change increasingly quickly so that less and less about social life remains stable and predictable. During this same turbulent historical period it has also been noticeable that a popular interest in sociology has emerged, but particularly the interest of a growing number of undergraduate students. This interest continues to expand in both volume and intensity and it is reflected in your personal attraction to our shared subject.

We might suggest that the recurring alterations in the structure of our society over the recent past, and our shared desire for the relative sense of security that society once provided, have brought forth a collective response from people to try to understand more about the relationships that hold between them. Thus as we all feel potentially less structured in our social lives we seek to arrest this experience of lack of control through our own knowledge.

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

At a time when governments internationally are calling out for a higher level of recruitment to mathematics, engineering, physics and chemistry, and industry and commerce are demanding increased skills in technology and natural science, students are choosing in vast numbers to study the humanities, but more especially the social sciences.

Clearly we now appear more preoccupied than ever before with questions concerning our personal and social identities, and our collective responses to social pressures and constraints. The boundaries of our interest and inquiry are expanding and we are more amenable to receiving information about our social conduct and adapting our behaviour in response to it. So, if we take a few examples: the changing attitudes of men towards women; the interactions between different cultural communities; the way that children are taught and assessed in schools; the relations between the forces of law and order and the public; the manner in which doctors consult with their patients; and the strategies and programmes that politicians employ; these are all, at some level, coming to be informed by what we might call a 'sociological perspective'.

In the same way that it is possible to point to different areas of everyday life and suggest that sociology has contributed to their modern form, either directly or indirectly, we can also say with confidence that there is no area of collective life and no aspect of social action that sociologists themselves have felt unable or unwilling to explore. Everyone anticipates that sociologists will want to speak about issues to do with social class, which has always appeared as one of our most significant explanatory concepts. However sociologists are equally concerned to study football hooliganism, HIV infection, humour, dying, racial conflict, childrearing practices, popular culture etc.: the list is inexhaustible. All of the social world is our stage but, of course, we tend to be drawn to study some topics more than others and that is usually because some topics are of more pressing concern and call forth a greater moral commitment at particular historical moments. It would be hard not to be concerned with HIV infection in the modern world.

When sociology was new – and a variety of histories and commentaries will tell you that it found its origins towards the end of the nineteenth century – its concerns were quite different to those that preoccupy us today. Sociology was, at the outset, a particularly European way of thinking even though a large part of its tradition developed in parallel in the USA. Throughout the nineteenth century all of the major European countries were still experiencing the disruptive after-effects of the French Revolution of 1789. The inflexible politics of an old order of government and privilege that had for so long kept societies stable and unchanged was now being questioned. The Revolution had violently challenged the long-held assumptions concerning power, prestige, hierarchy and status and had produced an instability that required an adjustment to change. These social adjustments were now all guided by a philosophical concern with the principles

INTRODUCTION

of equality, freedom and altruism deriving from the new French Republic. At the same time technology was developing and the way that people produced things for use and consumption in society had changed. Farming and small-scale domestic manufacture were giving way to industrialization and mass production. People were moving from the countryside into towns, urban populations were becoming larger and denser, and, most significant of all, the structure of relationships between people was altering dramatically and irrevocably through new divisions of labour. Overriding and directing all of these changes a new form of political economy had evolved which, through a variety of mutations, was destined to rule our lives and contribute to major world threatening antagonisms up until the present day. This form is what we have come to call 'capitalism'. It is, in part, a mode of production but it is also a description of the way in which, at a more general level, all of social life becomes transformed into a market and thus all things, people and actions take on a quantitative value. This transformation through capitalism begins, in turn, to shape the way that people relate to one another and, subsequently, the ways in which their personal identities are formed.

All through our discipline's formative period sociologists selected their problems from the agenda of their day and treated them not simply as practical issues but also as moral issues, that is, as issues of value. So when Marx considered social stratification, Weber sought to explain bureaucracy and Durkheim investigated the social causes of suicide, they all did so with a larger view of what a 'good society' might be in mind, and they were all writing about problems that derive from capitalism. In the context of our society at the end of the twentieth century it is less and less easy to think about values that are shared or beliefs that are common. Sociology has adapted to this problem, in part, by beginning to find ways of addressing the personal experience of a whole range of different groups within the world of today. Now, even though we may not have abandoned our visions of the 'good society', as sociologists living in the present we tend to be concerned with more specific contexts. So, for example, we might wish: to express the politics and identities of people of different genders and different sexual orientations; to articulate the experience of people from a variety of ethnic groups and belief systems; to realize what it is to be a child rather than an adult; or to demonstrate the social constraints pressing on a person with 'special needs'. These examples, and there are many more, might indicate how our work as sociologists continues to have a general, and critical, appeal and application even in a modern society where it is increasingly difficult to spot the values or beliefs that people hold in common.

In this book we have chosen, quite specifically, to look at some pairs of ideas that we think will help you to understand sociology as a subject with a tradition but, more importantly, will help you relate to sociology as a relevant way of understanding your world today and your place within it.

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As a student of sociology, or indeed almost any subject at university, it is possible to fall into the trap of thinking that what you are studying always belongs to someone else. By this I mean that you arrive at a strange institution apparently full of learned and expert people who 'know' about sets of very complex ideas which they will 'tell' you about for the next three years. These elders (that is, the professors and lecturers) produce your knowledge through their research. Your textbooks, written by learned people, are full of ideas that you must collect and store for three years. These authors, researchers and teachers, ancient and modern, 'own' the subject. You, on the other hand, have little or no part in the subject, you assume that your role is to listen and collect and maybe copy these learned people: this makes your learning passive and your practice merely imitation. This kind of learning is something we pick up at home, through school and through the mass media: it is a difficult habit to break.

Adopting and retaining this passivity is, of course, no way to study and it is certainly no way to fill three years of your adult life while you are at university. You must engage with your subject, use your subject, address your own problems through the subject and, as I have said before, treat it as a way of seeing the world – your way of seeing the world. This book attempts to encourage your participation.

None of the authors writing here believe sociology is a museum that you should spend time simply walking around, looking at the dusty exhibits. We are all inviting you to join in and make your interests and perspectives relevant through our shared, and chosen, subject – sociology. Sociology is a living subject, a living practice and a living way of coming to know about the world. You as newcomers and enthusiasts are vital to that life, and your vitality feeds our shared tradition. Our chosen method for inviting you to engage with us in looking at modern issues in the modern world, which we all inhabit in our different ways, is by investigating pairs of ideas that we see as fundamental to sociological understanding. These we have called *core dichotomies*. Dichotomies are ideas that are divided into two parts and the parts usually stand in opposition to one another.

Let us take an example of dichotomous or binary thinking. If I decide to vote for a particular party at an election, I may do so because:

- (a) I freely choose to *or* I feel constrained to do so;
- (b) the party represents my interests *or* my parents always voted for them;
- (c) I have decided according to the current state of the economy *or* I have been influenced by the media and propaganda;
- (d) the party closely identifies with my own moral position *or* people of my social class always vote for this party,

and so on. These alternative pairs of reasons are dichotomies.

INTRODUCTION

Now the first reasons in these pairs are explanations in terms of freedom, choice, individuality and free will; the second reasons are explanations in terms of constraint, determinism, social pressure and public opinion. As sociologists we might examine this problem through the core dichotomy of agency (first reasons) and structure (second reasons). Does somebody act according to the influence of either agency or structure? The answer will usually be somewhere in the middle. However, employing the dichotomy allows us to put exaggerated forms of the arguments on each side, or each end if we see it as a continuum, and the balance between the extremes often helps us to achieve a clearer answer in the middle ground. Of course the dichotomy of agency and structure, which is the first one discussed in this book, is not just about voting behaviour: it is about all social behaviour, from the most serious to the most trivial, from why I might commit a crime to why I might take up smoking or even wear a yellow tie! Remember, nothing escapes the interest of the sociologist.

So we reason in the form of dichotomies here because they enable us to establish arguments from two strong and opposite positions and because they will enable you also to engage with debates from both sides and to see the strengths of the arguments on both sides. In this way, we anticipate, you will not simply inhabit the debates or arguments that belong to other people; rather you will be in a position to make your own mind up or to reform the problem.

There are other good reasons for approaching sociology through core dichotomies. The first is to do with location, that is, your location and the character of your society. For years sociology spoke about the world from the perspective of the Western European and this caused it to be guilty of what anthropologists refer to as 'ethnocentrism'. Ethnocentrism means that a person has a set of ideas containing an attitude that his or her own race, nation or culture is superior to all others, and this can be achieved not only explicitly by judging other societies inferior but also implicitly by simply ignoring them and their differences. In a more modern context many feel that sociology has been further guilty of speaking about the world from the perspective of the Western European white male. We do certainly have to be increasingly conscious of the perspective we adopt and the partiality that our perspective reveals.

By analysing social events in terms of abstract dichotomies like agency and structure we are less likely to ignore the views and arguments of others not like ourselves. Indeed, by using dichotomous thinking we are more likely to provide a space from within which others' differences can emerge. It is also the case that your particular perspective as a reader of this book, perhaps as a woman, perhaps as a member of an ethnic minority, perhaps as a member of a working-class family, perhaps as a resident of New York, Melbourne or Manchester, will not be glossed over when we discuss the world through dichotomies in the way that it might be if I gave you my explanation, however clear, as a white, middle-class, British male, of, for

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

example, the difficulties facing the modern family in London. What you would learn about is another person's experiences, perspective and social location. Dichotomies then have a relevance to people's social experience across different social locations and can therefore include us all, without any exclusion.

The second reason for approaching sociological issues through dichotomies is to do with history and time. We might rightly suppose that although sociologists from the early twentieth century would know nothing about the atom bomb, global warming or the influence of television on children, they would certainly be concerned with a different set of issues about class, solidarity, industrialization, and the influence of religion – all things that are less relevant to us now. However, just as we could place each one of our concerns within a dichotomous argument based on continuity and change or on fact and value, for example, so also could they. The dichotomies then are relatively timeless and will address problems stretching back to the origins of our discipline, but will also take us forward into a period when you, the readers, will be setting the problems for our discipline. In this way, to look at sociological issues through core dichotomies rather than through fashionable theories or perspectives alone will ensure that your thoughts and ideas will be timely, but simultaneously never out of date.

There is, however, one major drawback to arguing in terms of dichotomies which applies in specific cases. If we are looking at pairs of abstractions like the local and the global, or absolute and relative, then all of the advantages listed above accrue and we can extend our thinking about a topic. If, however, we are looking at substantive differences between people and placing them in oppositional pairs then we can create antagonisms and conflicts that may be unintentional, but are certainly divisive and potentially painful. Think, for example, of the pairings between: short and tall; able and disabled; gay and straight; or even bright and stupid. As sociologists we should recognize that these pairings, and many others, are constructed within our society and should therefore be critically investigated by us rather than reinforced in our discussions. To this end although we, in this book, recognize the absolute centrality of questions concerning 'gender' and also 'ethnicity' to understanding your own social identity and the social relationships that exist between people within the modern world, we do not set up our arguments as between men and women, or black people and white people. Both of these formulations you will recognize as having provided lasting social battlegrounds in terms of civil rights, the division of labour, differential life chances and notions of freedom and oppression. Rather we cover these two important topics through the less confrontational pairings of sex and gender, and race and ethnicity, which enables us to understand the different experiences of being gendered and belonging to a particular cultural group without setting these differences against one another. We trust that you will, in turn, be informed

INTRODUCTION

by these two debates but also recognize them to be substantive reworkings of the dichotomy between nature and culture.

Begin now, and remember that this book will provide you with a basis for the discussion of any of the interesting topics that appear in the other courses that you are taking, from methodology, through social structure, to all of the exciting and exploratory choices that you can make through your optional courses. It should also have an influence, at a later stage, if you are required to make a report or write a dissertation on a topic of your own. Here you will need to have developed a way of producing good arguments. Most specifically, on a day-to-day basis at university, when you are required to put a point in a seminar or a class, or just to express your point of view in a discussion with a friend, you will find that these basic dichotomies and the form of reasoning that they contain will predispose you for an active and fulfilling engagement in academic life.

Each of the authors contributing to this book has gone some way to helping you into their chosen dichotomy. We have all attempted to write in a manner that is user-friendly but not patronizing. You will find introductions to concepts and some concepts explained at length, but you will also find yourself, at times, involved in quite high-level and demanding theoretical questioning. Please do persevere. Remember, you are the 'active' learner and we are attempting to bring you into a way of seeing the world that is critical, valuable and rewarding – but never just simple. In addition, the authors have provided you with a list of **Key Concepts** for each chapter that you can look up and refer across your different courses. There is also a combined reference list for all the books and articles cited.

Best wishes.