

the very spine of the social organisation, since the fathers are responsible for the sons acquiring their own herds. In Providencia, the mother-son relationship is such a strong bond that it affects life in the nuclear family adversely. The Dogon are physically organised along kinship lines; both place of settlement and land rights follow the lineage, each lineage has a political representative, and the distribution of political power follows kinship lines. Finally, among the Yanomamö kinship is the main principle of loyalty and belonging, and the power-holders in this society draw on support from their kin to maintain their position. Kinship is thus a fundamental organising principle in these (and other) societies.

The role of the village council and hogon of the Dogon, or the headman of the Yanomamö, often consists of mediating between kin groups with opposing interests. However, they are also responsible for 'foreign policy'. There is no legitimate authority outside of the village, and each village is thus an independent political unit. To the villagers, the village is the centre of the universe. Family, livelihood, childhood memories, physical protection and future all lie there. (Here we should keep in mind that the tense is the ethnographic present. Neither the Dogon nor the Yanomamö are today unaffected by the state and world capitalism.)

One may thus ask why the Fulani do not live in villages. The answer is that the pattern of settlement in any society depends on a number of factors. The Fulani live in an area where there has traditionally been little competition over land rights. The savannah between the Sahara and the more humid coastal areas of Western Africa has always been thinly populated. The Fulani have had no competitors, there has been no imminent threat of war and they have depended on large grazing areas per household. They have also been flexible enough to unite in larger entities when required; the wet season has been a period for intensive ritual activities. In fact, it can be ecologically disastrous to enforce village organisation among cattle nomads, as some colonial and postcolonial regimes have tried in African countries. In Chapter 11, we shall nevertheless see how dispersed nomadic peoples may merge into larger entities when threatened by an external enemy.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Richard Fardon, ed.: *Localizing Strategies*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press 1990.  
Margaret Mead: *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1978 [1928].  
Colin Turnbull: *The Human Cycle*. New York: Simon & Schuster 1983.

## 6 PERSON AND SOCIETY

To say that societies function is trivial, but to say that everything in a society is functional, is absurd.

— Claude Lévi-Strauss

The person is a social product, but society is created by acting persons. In earlier chapters, this apparent paradox has been illustrated in several ways. It has also been made clear that there will always be some aspects of society which change and some aspects which remain the same, if we look at the whole system through a certain period of time. In this chapter, we draw some theoretical lessons from these themes, and also propose a model of the relationship between person and society on the one hand, and the relationship between structure and process on the other. These two dichotomies are fundamental components of the analytical framework of this book.

#### SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION

The totality of social institutions and status relationships makes up the social structure of society. It has been common to assume that this structure, in a certain sense, exists independently of the individuals who at any point in time happen to fill particular positions. Radcliffe-Brown expressed it like this in a famous statement:

The actual relations of Tom, Dick and Harry or the behaviour of Jack and Jill may go down in our field note-books and may provide illustrations for a general description. But what we need for scientific purposes is an account of the form of the structure. (1952, p. 192)

Social structure may thus be perceived as the matrix of society, emptied of humans; the totality of duties, rights, division of labour, norms, social control, etc., abstracted from ongoing social life. The point of this kind of conceptualisation is to develop an abstract model of a society which brings out its essential characteristics without unnecessary details and which may be used comparatively. A principal concern of Radcliffe-Brown and his contemporaries was to point out the functions of social institutions, to show how they supported and contributed to the maintenance of society as a whole. The general function of religion, for example, was held to lie in its ability to create solidarity and a sense of community, and to legitimate power

differences. The chief function of the ancestral cult of the Dogon may thus be said to be that it creates societal continuity and family solidarity, that it ties actors to the land through strong normative bonds and that it indirectly prevents revolt or revolution against the social order. The function of household organisation may be said to be, in nearly every society, to create stability and to secure the continuity of society through socialisation. When external influences, such as the introduction of capitalism, change the conditions of existence for households, one might say that the original household organisation has become dysfunctional: it is no longer practical and so eventually disappears. Within a structural-functionalist mode of thought, all social institutions thus appear as functional; if they are not functional, they vanish.

In classic structural-functionalism, from Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, society was often thought of as a kind of organism, as an integrated whole of functional social institutions. Kroeber (1952) described culture in a similar vein, by comparing it to a coral reef where new coral animals literally build upon their dead relatives. Seen as a whole, the coral reef (culture) is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts, and its form develops and changes gradually without the knowledge of the coral animals (actors).

The existence of certain social institutions was thus explained by reference to their function. Certain peoples believed in witchcraft, it was said, at least partly because the belief indirectly strengthened social integration and the stability of society – without the actors' knowledge of this function of witchcraft (see Chapter 15). In his theory of primitive religion, Durkheim therefore argued that when people believe that they worship supernatural powers, they really worship society.

Several problems have been pointed out in relation to this kind of argument. One obviously problematic aspect of structural-functionalism is the belief that a description of social structure might be tantamount to a good description of social life. If this were the case, we would have to expect people to act diligently and predictably according to a pre-established system of norms and sanctions. In fact this is not the case, as anyone who has done fieldwork knows. People break the rules, make exceptions, interpret norms in different and sometimes conflicting ways, and so on. An example could be the pattern of settlement among the transhumant reindeer-herding Sami of northern Scandinavia (Pehrson 1964). According to the Sami, a woman ought to join her husband's group at marriage (the technical term for this is virilocality). However, in practice only about half of them actually do so, and there is often a good reason for making an exception. Pehrson thus draws the conclusion that the transhumant Sami actually do not have a rule about post-marriage residence. Ladislav Holy and Milan Stuchlik (1983, p. 13) do not agree. They argue, rather, that the rule of virilocality definitely exists, since the Sami themselves say that the woman ought to join the man's group, even if the rule is often violated. This is obviously a valid point. In many societies, sexual infidelity is quite widespread, even if most of the

persons in question would agree that there is a rule to the effect that such a practice is morally objectionable.

Raymond Firth (1951), a former student of Malinowski, tried to resolve this problem through proposing a distinction between social structure and social organisation. The structure, according to this perspective, is the established pattern of rules, customs, statuses and social institutions. Social organisation, on the other hand, is defined as the dynamic aspect of structure; in other words, what people actually do: their decisions and patterns of action within the framework of the structure. This distinction is analogous to the distinction between status and role, and allows for a messier, less ordered social world than an exclusive reliance on a structural understanding would allow.

Firth's innovation represented an attempt to conceptualise social process; that is, society and social life seen as something which happens rather than something which is. This distinction does not imply that actors continuously break the rules and norms valid in their society, but rather that systems of rules do not specify exactly how people are to act. Even perfect knowledge of the Bible is certainly not adequate if we wish to understand how Christians act. The move from structure to process expressed in Firth's model has, incidentally, been characteristic of much later anthropological theorising.

#### SOCIAL SYSTEMS

The term 'social system' has been used a great deal here with no further definition. It can be defined as a set of social relations which are regularly actualised and thus reproduced as a system through interaction. A social system is further characterised by a (more or less) shared normative system and a functioning set of sanctions; that is, a certain degree of agreement or enforced conformity concerning the oughts and ought-nots of interaction within the limits of the system.

Up to now, we have dealt empirically with social systems at three levels: the dyadic relationship, the household and the village or local community. Do these levels thereby represent different cultures? If an actor engages in a relationship with her husband, in another relationship with her family and in a third relationship with her village, does that make her a member of three cultures? Of course not. But different social statuses are activated in the three cases, and the kinds of relationship engaged in may vary greatly. There are aspects of life which can only be shared with one's spouse, and there are other events (such as public rituals) which are not meaningful unless they are public. Culture may thus be understood as that which makes it possible for two or several actors to understand each other. It is not a 'thing' which one either has or does not have, and it can be relevant to talk of degrees of shared culture. Similarly, every actor is integrated, or participates, at several systemic levels in society. An adult may be a member of a nuclear family, a

profession, a political grouping and a nation. One may also conceptualise one's 'levels of belonging' in more geographic, or spatial, terms: one is a member of the nuclear family, a neighbourhood, a town, a province and a nation. There are also many other possible ways of delineating systemic levels in society. These systems exist only to the extent that they are maintained through regular interaction.

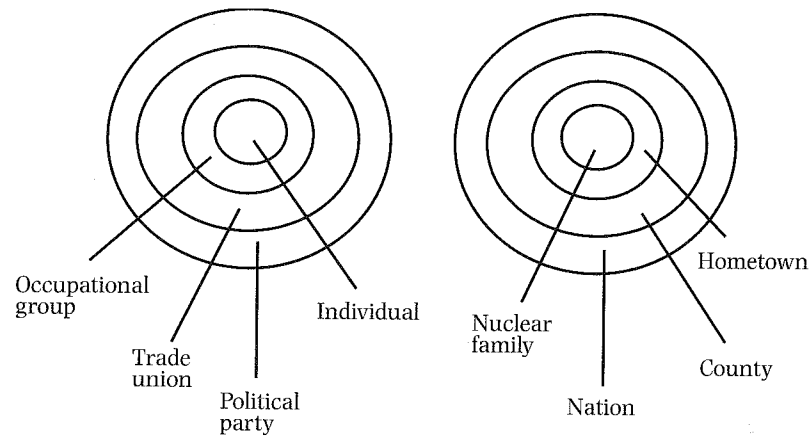


Figure 6.1 Two ways of conceptualising group membership in modern societies

The ethnographic examples of the last chapter reveal several systemic levels. Among the Fulani, the household, the kin group and the larger group assembling in the rainy season are relevant and important systemic levels which exist (or are activated) under particular circumstances. In the Caribbean village, the natal household remains an important systemic level for the male actor throughout his life. Among the Dogon and Yanomamö, on the contrary, the household, the lineage and the village seem to be the most important systemic levels. As regards many communities deeply integrated into large-scale social systems, it may be argued that the market and the state are the crucial systemic levels, although kinship and small groups remain important in such complex societies as well.

Distinctions between relevant systemic levels depends on which persons are related in which ways to which others. Put simply, it concerns which groups persons belong to, and what is the purpose of these groups. In anthropological studies, the analytical interests of the anthropologist are also important. Should one concentrate one's research efforts on the household, the kin group, the village, a network centred around a pub or an Internet chat group, a trade union, a factory or the nation-state? An obvious answer is that one might begin by finding out how the inhabitants of a society

themselves relate to their different webs of relationship; what appears as most important to them, and with whom do they carry out important tasks?

It is important to be able to distinguish between social system and social structure. A social system is just as abstract as the social structure, but it refers to a different kind of phenomenon. Social systems are delineable sets of social relationships between actors, whereas social structure (usually) refers to the totality of standardised relationships in a society. Both of those concepts may, however, be conceptualised as socially created channels and frameworks for human action, which provide both opportunities and constraints.

#### THE BOUNDARIES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

If we define a social system as a set of social relationships which are created and re-created through regular interaction, it makes sense to say that the boundaries of the system lie at the points where interaction decreases dramatically. In a relatively isolated village community, as among the Dogon in colonial and precolonial times, it would be appropriate to say that the relevant social system stops at the village boundary. The interaction engaged in by the inhabitants with outsiders is (traditionally) sporadic and relatively unimportant. Religion, family life, politics and production have all taken place within the limits of the village. However, concerning some activities, such as trade, the village appears as a sub-system; as a part of a larger system. Systemic boundaries are in this way not absolute, but relative to a kind of social context or a set of activities. Unless this is kept in mind, it will be difficult to delineate the boundaries of most social sub-systems in the contemporary world; in their different ways, they may link up with vast entities such as world Islam, the Internet or the global commodity market.

Society, if we think of it as an integrated whole, may also be divided analytically into various sub-systems. In the Dogon village, one such sub-system is the religious and ritual one, in which certain but not all members of society take part. Another sub-system, involving a different set of actors for different ends, would be the lineage organisation; a third would be the household, and so on. The relationship between such sub-systems is of great importance in anthropological research, since we aim at an understanding of the intrinsic connections between different social institutions and activities.

#### NETWORKS

The term 'social network' has in recent years entered the everyday vocabulary of many societies. In day-to-day speech, it refers to an ego-centred set of relationships, as when people talk of 'my social network'. It may also be used to refer to a set of relationships activated for a particular end, without necessarily being organised around a single person. The

analytical meaning of the term 'social network' is thus related to the meaning of social systems; generally, we may say that a network is a person-dependent and thus not very enduring social system.

The first anthropologist to use the expression social network was John Barnes, originally an Africanist, who carried out fieldwork in Bremnes, western Norway, in the early 1950s (Barnes 1990 [1954]). Since the hamlet lacked unilineal corporate groups of the kind he was accustomed to from his African research, he needed other analytical tools to grasp the mechanisms of integration. To begin with, he noted that each person in the parish belonged to several groups; the household, the hamlet, the professional group and so on. For analytical purposes, Barnes identified three kinds of social fields in Bremnes. First is the territorially delineated field, which is hierarchically organised through public administration. Second is the economic field, which consists of many mutually dependent but formally independent entities, such as fishing boats, fish oil factories, groceries and so on. These two fields have a certain stability through time, to some extent independently of the actors. The third social field Barnes delineated, however, 'had no units or boundaries; it had no co-ordinating organization. It was made up of the ties of friendship and acquaintance which everyone growing up in Bremnes society partly inherited and largely built up for himself' (1990, p. 72). These ties existed between social equals, and were continuously modified as actors changed their circle of acquaintances.

A main point in Barnes's study is that this kind of society lacks the stable corporations typical of African societies. An important contributing reason for the lack of corporations in Bremnes, he argued, was the bilateral kinship system: kin reckoning which includes both the mother's and the father's side.

I have my cousins and sometimes we act together; but they have their own cousins who are not mine and so on indefinitely ... Each person is, as it were, in touch with a number of other people, some of whom are directly in touch with each other and some of whom are not. (Barnes 1990, p. 72)

It is this kind of system of relations that Barnes proposed calling social networks. Here it should be noted that networks often have no boundaries and no clear internal organisation, since any person may consider him- or herself the centre of the network.

Barnes further holds that one of the most important differences between small communities and large-scale societies is the fact that the networks are more dense in the former than in the latter. When two people meet for the first time in a large-scale urban society, it is quite rare for them to discover that they have many common acquaintances; in small-scale societies, on the contrary, 'everybody' knows each other in many different ways – through kinship, common friends and neighbours, shared school experiences, professional life and/or intermarriage.

The network has a fleeting and impermanent character. The term is therefore most appropriate in descriptions of social fields, or sub-systems,

which primarily exist by virtue of ties between concrete persons, and which therefore are transformed, or disappear, when those persons for some reason cease to maintain the ties. The network may be a more useful descriptive term than more rigid concepts, such as 'social structure' when the locus of study is a large-scale social system. Indeed, social theorists such as Manuel Castells (1996) have gone so far as to suggest that the contemporary era, 'the information age', is generally characterised by flux, instability and shifting boundaries, and that it may therefore be described as 'a network society'.

## SCALE

We frequently say that anthropologists have traditionally studied 'small-scale societies' as opposed to 'large-scale societies'. But what is scale? It could be seen as a measure of social complexity in a society (see for instance Barth 1978). The scale of a society can be defined as the total number of statuses necessary for the society to reproduce itself. If we compare the Yanomamö village with the Caribbean one, it becomes evident that the latter has a larger scale than the former. The Yanomamö community is small in size and relatively simple in terms of its division of labour. In the Caribbean village the division of labour is more complex: there are ties of mutual dependency between a large number of persons because of professional specialisation, and the village is intrinsically linked to systems of much larger scale (the state, foreign countries through migration, etc.). If we move on to industrial societies, the level of scale is enormous: the mutual dependency may encompass millions of persons. If some of their statuses cease to contribute to the upholding of the system, it will change: if, say, all bus drivers in the Netherlands go on strike, this will, directly or indirectly, affect the lives of most of the Dutch.

Scale may also be regarded as a measure of relative anonymity: the larger the scale, the fewer the actors of the system one knows personally. We now turn to an example indicating the possible uses of the concept of scale.

Case Noyale is a village on the south-western coast of Mauritius, an island-state in the Indian Ocean (Eriksen 1988). About 700 people live in the village, which has approximately 170 households. The main source of livelihood is fishing, but many villagers have other work. Some work at a sugar plantation nearby, some are independent farmers, some work at a hotel 5 kilometres away and so on. The village has a grocery, a few small shops, a post office and a dispensary.

In a certain sense, one may say that Case Noyale is a social system of relatively small scale. The division of labour and the specialisation in the village itself are limited, and there are few local organisations with specialised aims. Virtually all of the villagers know each other.

On the other hand, it is ultimately not very helpful to regard Case Noyale as an isolated small-scale system. About 20 per cent of the adults work

outside the village, and several of those who work within it (including the Catholic priest and the schoolteacher) live elsewhere. The fishermen sell their catch to an intermediary, a 'banian', who drives to and from town daily. Several of the teenagers of the village attend secondary school at Rose-Hill or Quatre-Bornes, towns which are about an hour away by bus. The inhabitants receive much of their knowledge about the outside world through radio and television; the school has state funding; the products sold in the grocery are largely imported from abroad, and so on.

From this sketch, it can be extrapolated that scale can be highly relevant in the study of agency. Scale sets limits to the scope of options for action, but simultaneously it is the product of action. In Case Noyale, the first teenager who went to secondary school became a participant in a system of larger scale than his friends were involved in. Every time someone files a court case at the District Court of Rivière Noire, he or she activates a level of scale higher than is common. To most villagers at most times, the village of Case Noyale is the relevant social system. This is where they go to primary school, work, marry and buy necessary commodities. However, Case Noyale may also be regarded as an integrated part of the nation-state of Mauritius (school, public transportation and other facilities are organised at a national level, and the fish is eventually sold at the national fish market) and even, in some respects, as a part of the global economic system, since the backbone of the Mauritian economy is the sugar industry.

In order to say anything meaningful about the scale of a society, it is necessary to investigate social relations carefully. Above all, we must identify which tasks the members of society are faced with and which options they have in carrying them out. If these tasks – subsistence, socialisation, politics, religion, and so on – depend on many actors with specialised statuses, the scale is by definition larger than would be the case in a society where nearly everybody knows nearly everything. Scale is also, as we have seen, situational in the sense that all actors move from situations of small scale to those of larger scale, and back again, on a daily basis.

#### NON-LOCALISED NETWORKS: THE INTERNET

In *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Daniel Miller and Don Slater remark that the Internet transcends dualisms such as local/global and small scale/large scale (Miller and Slater 2000, Chapter 1). In this, they mean that online communities of, say, Trinidadians (their ethnographic focus) can be based on close interpersonal relationships even if the participants are scattered around the world (due to the extensive migration of Trinidadians). To some extent, ethnographic studies of Internet users raise problems reminiscent of those encountered by Barnes when he came to Bremnes from Southern Africa. Where were the corporate groups? he asked. Where was the gravitational point of the community? Regarding the Internet, a similar

question may be, in what sense do online communities exist? They come into existence only when people log on, quite unlike local communities, which exist in more imperative ways. An interesting issue thus concerns the degree to which Internet participation creates binding commitments similar to those created in offline settings. The Internet is a decentred, unlocalised 'network of networks' (Ulf Hannerz's term) which may seem to operate according to a different logic from other social networks.

Many studies of Internet users so far have confined themselves to online research. While this research strategy may in many ways be rewarding, anthropologists will ask research questions which require them to collect other kinds of data as well. Notably, the relationship between online activities and other social activities needs to be studied if we are going to understand the place of the Internet in people's lives. In their study, Miller and Slater have participated online with Trinidadians, made household surveys of computer use, carried out structured interviews with businesspeople, politicians and other elite persons, hung out in cybercafes, and so on – in brief, they have employed a wide variety of methods in order to assess the impact of the Internet on Trinidadian society. Some of their findings are surprising. For example, Trinis do not customarily distinguish between online and offline life, between the 'virtual' and the 'real'; to them, all their activities form a seamless whole. Also, they are far from being 'deterritorialised' online; on the contrary, they tend to overcommunicate their identity as Trinidadians. The Internet actually enhances their national and, in many cases, religious identity. It also turns out to be a good medium for intimate conversations.

The newness of information technologies such as the Internet should not lead us to believe that everything about it is new. Ethnographic studies of Internet users will tend to ask similar research questions to those asked in studies of local communities or localised urban networks, and the methods employed will also tend to be similar. But it is equally important to keep in mind that information technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones and satellite television create new frameworks for communication and interaction. In a sense, as Miller and Slater say, the far/near, small scale/large scale and local/global dichotomies are dissolved; but instead, other issues arise – concerning place, commitment and, not least, the boundaries of the network. If it is difficult to delineate the boundaries of, say, Bremnes or Case Noyale, the problem of delineation is even greater here. This is the kind of question which needs to be addressed by anthropologists today, as they bring their skills in network studies and participant observation to new areas.

#### GROUP AND GRID

Distinctions between small-scale and large-scale societies are still used in social anthropology, even if this kind of distinction is problematic as most actors are involved in social fields of large as well as small scale. Mauritian

village life does not preclude having French penfriends or regular interaction with Australian tourists, or consuming Burmese rice, or corresponding with foreign anthropologists by e-mail; just as engaging in the nuclear family and personal friendships remain very real possibilities for the inhabitants of Germany.

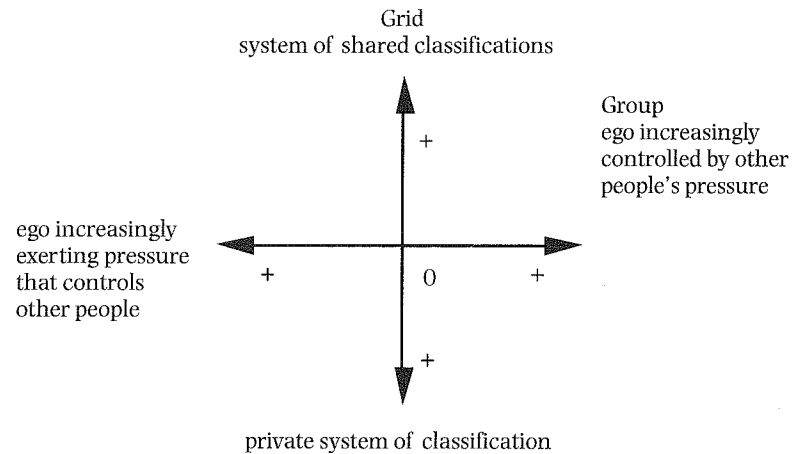


Figure 6.2 Grid and group (Douglas 1970, p. 84)

Another way of classifying societies, which concentrates on the principles of social control rather than size and complexity, has been proposed by Mary Douglas (Douglas 1970, 1978). In many of her theoretical studies in anthropology, sociology and social philosophy, she draws on a classificatory scheme that runs along two axes (Figure 6.2), which she labels 'group' and 'grid'. Along the 'group' dimension, persons and societies may be classified according to their degree of social cohesion, while the 'grid' dimension describes the degree of shared classifications or knowledge. Purely personal notions, which are not shared with others, belong below zero. Strong group indicates that other persons exert strong pressure on the individual; strong grid indicates that people are rigidly classified at the societal level, which leaves little space for individual idiosyncrasies.

One 'strong grid, strong group' society is, in Douglas's view, the Tallensi of Ghana as described by Fortes during colonialism. 'Here the public system of rights and duties equips each man with a full identity, prescribing for him what and when he eats, how he grooms his hair, how he is buried or born' (Douglas 1970, p. 87). Such societies, Douglas argues, are strictly conformist, strongly integrated and create rigid boundaries vis-à-vis outsiders.

Another kind of society is the 'weak grid, strong group' one, which Douglas exemplifies by describing the situation in some Central African societies during late colonialism (the 1950s; see also Chapter 16). In these societies, contradictory demands are placed on people; they must be obedient, but also strive for individual excellence. They are expected to till the land of their ancestors, but also to earn money, which can only be achieved through migration. Internal differentiation is unclear and ambiguous, unlike the strong 'ritualisation' of social relationships in the previous type.

The third societal type exemplified in Douglas (1970) is the kind she calls 'strong grid', where group cohesion is weak. This is a sort of society, she argues, which might be better described in terms of temporary networks than in terms of corporate groups; where there are no chiefs and no rigid boundaries. Nevertheless, she notes, the meanings and classifications of society are shared.

The 'strong grid' type also has another variant, which can be described as the 'big-man system' (see Chapter 11), oscillating from the left to the right on the upper half of the diagram. The big man, a self-made leader in a small-scale society, tries to exert as much pressure as possible on his subjects, but as his power grows so does their discontent, and they pull him towards the right.

Where do industrial societies belong in Douglas's scheme? Admittedly, this is a simplification of her account. In reality, societies are spread out on the diagram, so that some groups or some social contexts belong, say, in the top left slot while others might be placed in the top right corner. In the view of some, industrial societies are 'weak group, weak grid': they are individualistic and anonymous, and thus others exert little social control over ego; and they are internally differentiated in such a way that boundaries between categories of persons, and between society and the outside world, are unclear. Another perspective might rather maintain that industrial societies are 'strong group' because of the power of the state in exerting pressure on its citizens. Douglas suggests, for her part, that there are remarkable similarities between 'some Londoners' and Mbuti pygmies. Both modern individualists and egalitarian hunter-gatherers may tentatively be placed close to zero on the vertical axis ('complete freedom' in Douglas's terms). A strongly integrated nation-state, such as Iceland, can perhaps be placed squarely in the top half of the diagram, while loosely integrated urban societies (Los Angeles for instance), would cluster around the vertical axis and – if social disintegration is strong – mostly in the bottom half. Rich eccentrics, vagrants and other 'outsiders', such as artists, belong largely below zero. On the other hand, religious cults and other strongly integrated groups in modern societies, like Jehovah's Witnesses, could be firmly placed with the Tallensi in the top right area of the diagram.

Douglas's scheme can be very instructive as a tool for thinking about humans in society. It is simple, non-evolutionary and can be fruitful for investigating the relationship between cohesion and other dimensions of

social life, such as cosmologies. Its central premises are Durkheimian, and Douglas states explicitly that too little sharing and too weak social control (in other words, a condition approaching zero) is tantamount to anomie and disintegration. While role analysis and models of scale and networks take the social actor as their point of departure, Douglas's work reveals a distinctly systemic approach. A possible implication of the model could be that people who are not fully integrated are pathological and that social and symbolic integration is the 'aim' towards which every society strives. Douglas emphasises that 'societies' do the classifying, and though people relate to it individually and may even create a private classificatory system, what matters sociologically is the shared system of knowledge and norms.

#### SOCIETY AND ACTOR

The founder of Social Darwinism, Herbert Spencer (who also coined the term 'social structure'), proposed that social relationships ought in general to be founded on voluntary contracts between individuals. Spencer was an early proponent of a school of thought which may be called individualist, as opposed to collectivist. Individualist thought (or methodological individualism) is often associated with Max Weber, whereas collectivist thought (or methodological collectivism) is associated with Marx and Durkheim. The difference between these approaches to social life has been stated succinctly by Holy and Stuchlik (1983, p. 1), who say that anthropologists try to find out either what it is that makes people do what they do, or how societies work. Most anthropologists probably hold that they do both, but there is an important difference between the perspectives. Later chapters distinguish between actor-centred and system-centred accounts, and it will become clear that the two approaches may indeed lead to different, if complementary, kinds of insight.

Actor-centred accounts, which stress choice, goal-directed action and individual idiosyncrasies, emerged in European social anthropology in the 1950s as critiques of the then dominant structural-functionalist models. The structural-functionalists regarded society as an integrated whole where the social institutions 'worked together', more or less in the same way as body parts are complementary to each other. The individual was not granted a great deal of interest, and individual agency was seen more or less as a side-effect of society's reproduction of itself.

'Can "society" have "needs" and "aims"?', asked the critics rhetorically, and replied in the negative. Society is no living organism, they said; it is only the arbitrary result of myriad single acts. Further, they pointed out that it is misleading to use biological metaphors in the description of society. The sharpest critics of structural-functionalism instead emphasised that society existed largely by virtue of interaction. Norms, therefore, were to be seen as a result rather than as a cause of interaction (Barth 1966).

The structural-functionalist concept of function was also subjected to severe criticism. Already in 1936, Gregory Bateson had written that the term 'function' is an expression from mathematics which has no place in social science (Bateson 1958 [1936]). Functionalist explanation, it was later remarked (Jarvie 1968), is circular in that the premisses contain the conclusion. Since the observed facts by default have to be 'functional', all the social scientist has to do is to look for their functions.

It is a truism that social institutions are functional in the sense that they contribute to the survival of society, since they are themselves part of the society that survives. This does not, however, explain *why* a given society develops, say, either monotheism or a witchcraft institution, or why some societies are patrilineal whereas others are matrilineal. In other words, structural functionalism promises to *explain* cultural variation, but succeeds only in *describing* the interrelationships between institutions.

From a different perspective, Edmund Leach (1954) has pointed out that societies are by no means as stable as one would expect from a structural-functionalist viewpoint. His analysis of politics among the Kachin of upper Burma reveals a cyclical system, where the political institution in its very structure carries the germ of its own destruction. In this regard, it is far from functional. In contemporary anthropological research, which stresses change and process just as much as stability, structural-functionalism is not an option as a research strategy, but its influence continues to be felt, particularly in its emphasis on the interconnections between different institutions in society.

#### THE DUALITY OF STRUCTURE

Obviously, actors make decisions, and it is equally obvious that societies change. However, actors do not act entirely on their own whim: there are bound to be structural preconditions for their acts. There are phenomena which cannot be imagined as purely individual products, which are inherently collective phenomena. Religion is often mentioned in this context, as well as language. Neither can be thought of as aspects of individuals: on the contrary, religion, language and morality are social preconditions for the production of individuals. Anthropologists who stress the role of individuals in the making of society would answer that morality, language and religion certainly exist, but that they cannot help us in predicting action and that they cannot be taken for granted. They change: we must look into what people actually do, and why they do it, in order to understand what these phenomena mean and why they are maintained or transformed through time.

It may sometimes seem as though the contrast between individualist and collectivist accounts is a problem of the same order as the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg. The individual is in many regards a social

product, but only individuals can create societies. What we must do therefore is to distinguish clearly between the two perspectives and try to see them as complementary. Neither individual nor society can be conceptualised without the other.

Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) has tried to reconcile these two main dimensions of social life, agency and structure, through his general theory of structuration. The problem Giddens sets out to resolve is the same one that has been posed in various ways in earlier sections of this chapter: on the one hand, humans choose their actions deliberately and try their best to realise their goal, which is a good life (although, an anthropologist would add, there are significant cultural variations as to what is considered a good life). On the other hand, humans definitely act under pressure, which varies between people, contexts and societies and which limits their freedom of choice and to some extent determines the course of their agency.

Giddens's very general solution to the paradox can be summarised in his concept of the duality of structure. Social structure, he writes, must simultaneously be understood as the necessary conditions for action *and* as the cumulative result of the totality of actions. Society exists only as interaction, but at the same time society is necessary for interaction to be meaningful. This model combines the individual and the societal aspects of social life, at least at a conceptual level. The art of social research, in Giddens's view, largely consists of relating the two levels to each other. His model, and related models (of which there are many), try to reconcile the idea of the free, voluntary act and the idea of systemic coercion.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967) deal with many of the same problems as Giddens. Inspired by the social phenomenology of Alfred Schütz and Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, their point of departure is the fact that humans are, at birth, thrown into a pre-existing social world, and they re-create this world through their actions. In addition, Berger and Luckmann emphasise the ways in which each new act modifies the conditions for action (what Giddens calls the recursive character of action). The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that a man cannot enter the same river twice, because both man and river would have changed in the meanwhile; Berger and Luckmann would hold that a man cannot undertake the same act twice, since the first act would change the system slightly.

The social system, or structure, according to this perspective, would consist of the process of ongoing interaction, but it also consists of frozen action. Both social institutions and material structures such as buildings and technology are products of human action. However, they take on an objective existence and appear as givens, as taken-for-granted which humans act upon: they determine conditions for agency. In this way, Berger and Luckmann argue, the institutionalisation of society takes place and society, although the product of subjective action, becomes an objective reality exerting power over the individual consciousness. Thereby they answer their own main question, namely that of how living human activity

(a process) can produce a world consisting of 'things' (social structure and material objects).

Just as Kroeber's coral reef reproduces itself while slightly modifying itself through every new event, human action relates to earlier human action in the reproduction of and change to society. New acts are not mechanical repetitions of earlier acts, but at the same time they are dependent on earlier acts. The first act determines where the next begins, but not where it ends.

Berger and Luckmann's influential perspective is consistent with Marx's notion of labour and the 'freezing' of social life; he once wrote that the dead (labour) seizes the living (labour). The creative aspect of human activity is sedimented as dead material, be it a building, a tool or a convention. Social life, and the eternal becoming of society, can thereby be seen as an immanent tension between ongoing human action and the social institutions' limiting effect on the options for choice; between the solid (structure, institutions) and the fleeting (process, movement).

#### SOCIAL MEMORY AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Societies can be delineated through enduring systems of interaction and through the presence of shared social and political institutions with a certain continuity through time, although neither boundaries nor continuity are ever absolute. A related feature of integration, which emphasises the cultural rather than the social, concerns knowledge and acquired skills. Whereas it was for years common to assume that the members of a society (at least a small-scale society) shared the same basic outlook and values, detailed ethnographic evidence as well as critical voices from various camps (which could for the sake of brevity be labelled Marxist, feminist, postcolonial and post-modernist) have revealed that knowledge is unevenly distributed and that members of a society do not necessarily have shared representations.

The issue concerning to what extent culture is shared within society is a complex one which has led to a lot of heated debate, some of it clearly based on misunderstandings; let us therefore initially make it clear that sharing at one level does not necessarily imply sharing at another. Societies may appear both as patterned and as chaotic, depending on the analytical perspective employed and on the empirical focus. Language, for example, is by definition shared by the members of a linguistic community, but this certainly does not mean that everybody masters it equally well. Indeed, oratorical skills are an important source of political power in many societies. The unequal distribution of linguistic skills, and its consequences for power in society, is shown in a very simple and instructive way through the work of Basil Bernstein (1972) and William Labov (1972), two sociolinguists. Briefly, Bernstein wanted to show why working-class children in Britain generally achieved poorer school results than middle-class children. He found that the language acquired in working-class homes was less compatible with the standard



### Key Debates in Anthropology

In the mid-1980s, Tim Ingold reports (Ingold 1996), he felt a lack of vitality regarding debate about 'the theoretical and intellectual foundations' of social anthropology. In his view, the discipline suffered from three problems: first, it had become fragmented into narrow specialisations with little overarching debate between the sub-fields. Second, there were few new academic appointments at the time, leading in turn to a paucity of fresh ideas. Third, Ingold claims, anthropologists no longer seemed to engage with major issues of wide public relevance. In order to address this problem, Ingold initiated a series of annual debates hosted by the University of Manchester, where colleagues and students from the whole country were invited. The debates, organised by the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT), were structured in an unusual way: Two anthropologists were asked to support a particular 'motion' and two were asked to oppose it. At the end, the audience were asked to vote for and against the 'motion'. Although this form has an ironic edge – truth is not decided through democratic voting – these polemical debates doubtless contributed to a revitalisation of the general theoretical debate in social anthropology. The six first debates (from 1988 to 1993) have been published in book form (Ingold 1996). The topics and results are as follows.

- Social anthropology is a generalizing science or it is nothing. For: 26. Against: 37. Abstentions: 8. Comment: the problem was probably the term 'science' and not the term 'generalizing'; many felt uncomfortable with the implied association with natural science.
- The concept of society is theoretically obsolete. For: 45. Against: 40. Abstentions: 10. Comment: surprisingly many felt that we can no longer use the word 'society'. On the other hand it may be theoretically obsolete and yet useful in practice, although it is far from an accurate technical term.
- Human worlds are culturally constructed. For: 41. Against: 26. Abstentions: 7. Comment: this is a take on the classic 'nature/nurture' issue – what is inborn and universal, what is cultural and variable? Most British anthropologists still seem to favour nurture, but a generation ago, they would have won even more comfortably.
- Language is the essence of culture. For: 24. Against: 47. Abstentions: 7. Comment: although a clear majority held that non-linguistic aspects of culture are essential, the result might have been very different twenty years earlier in Britain (when structuralism was influential) or today in the United States, where cognitive and linguistic anthropology remain important.

- The past is a foreign country. For: 26. Against: 14. Abstentions: 7. Comment: the proposed motion is ambiguous (it quotes the title of David Lowenthal's wonderful book, which again quotes from a novel), and the debate largely concerned whether the interpretation of past events are reminiscent of the interpretation of other cultures.
- Aesthetics is a cross-cultural category. For: 22. Against: 42. Abstentions: 4. Comment: does beauty exist (as philosophers from Plato to Kant believe), or can it be dissolved into merely cultural notions of beauty? Convincing win to the relativists here.

version used in schools than the language spoken in middle-class homes was. The dominant code of society, that considered 'proper English', was thus identical with the sociolect of the middle class. Meanwhile Labov showed, in a study of black children in the US, that the linguistic difference between blacks and whites did not represent a lower 'cognitive complexity' among black children, but rather that their way of expressing complex statements differed from the dominant idiom in such a way as to impair them in school. The linguistic code favoured in schools, in Labov's analysis, was not 'more sophisticated' than the black sociolect, but rather a hidden mechanism for ensuring white middle-class dominance.

Social inequality is reproduced at the symbolic level through the transmission of different kinds of knowledge through socialisation. It has been customary to believe that all members of a 'primitive' small-scale society by and large obtained the same body of knowledge and skills, but anthropological research has revealed that social differentiation and political power in such societies is just as closely related to differences in knowledge and mastery of symbolic universes as in modern complex ones. Moreover, such self-reproducing patterns of difference are difficult to eradicate even if one actively tries, as has been done in social democratic societies, to ensure that every member of society has access to roughly the same body of knowledge and skills. They are intrinsic to social organisation and the division of labour, and the differences in the transmission of knowledge are connected with other social differences to which we shall return in later chapters.

There are many ways of accounting for differences in skills and knowledge within societies. Feminists have tended to follow one or both of two lines of argument: (1) women experience the world differently from men because they are women; (2) it is in the interest of patriarchy (male rule) to keep socially valuable skills away from women. Analyses inspired by Marxism tend to link the study of knowledge and skills to that of power and ideology (see Chapters 9, 11 and 14), while social anthropologists inspired by Durkheim may relate such differences to the division of labour, which thereby contributes to the integration of society. It should be noted that the designation of 'valuable knowledge' and, more generally, the very definition

of the world, is a form of power (see Bourdieu 1982; see also Chapter 15). Nonetheless, values and rules of conduct are taken for granted as much by the powerful as by the powerless, and their taken-for-grantedness can contribute to explaining the maintenance of a social order which might otherwise appear as unjust – they make the social order appear natural and therefore inevitable – as well as accounting for some degree of cultural continuity.

Paul Connerton, in a study of social memory (1989), argues for a distinction between three kinds of memory: personal memory (which is to do with biography and personal experiences), cognitive memory (which relates to general knowledge about the world) and, importantly, habit-memory, which is embodied, or incorporated, rather than cognitive. Connerton argues that habit-memory is in highly significant ways created and reproduced through bodily practices embedded in rules of etiquette, gestures, meaningful postures (such as sitting with one's legs crossed), handwriting and other acquired abilities which the actors do not normally perceive as cultural skills but rather as mere technical abilities or even 'social instincts'. He particularly emphasises rituals as enactments of embodied knowledge. Like Foucault (1979) before him, Connerton stresses the social and political implications of bodily discipline in reproducing values, 'inscribed' knowledge and social hierarchies. This kind of knowledge has arguably been understated by scholars working in diverse fields, including anthropology, where knowledge that can be verbalised tends to be privileged.

In an original attempt to explain the transmission, spread and transformations of social representations, Dan Sperber has proposed what he calls an epidemiology of representations (1985, 1989, 1996). Using an analogy from medical science, but also obviously drawing on Lévi-Strauss, Sperber stresses that representations spread in a different way from viruses, which are simply duplicated. 'For example', he writes (1989, p. 127), 'it would have been very surprising if what you understand by my text were an exact reproduction of the ideas I try to express through this means.' Knowledge and skills therefore, in Sperber's analysis, change (are transformed) slightly each time they are transmitted through communication, although the actors may be unaware of this happening.

Although the mode of communication depends on a number of factors, including communications technology, the basic 'epidemic' character of knowledge transmission is, in Sperber's view, universal. Interestingly, he offers a method for the study of representations which does not presuppose direct access to the minds of the actors, by focusing on that which is public and communicated, yet enables the researcher to identify both variation and change, and – perhaps – properties of the mental make-up of the informants. The epidemiological model further seems to overcome shortcomings of some other approaches to knowledge in its ability to account for both sharing and variation, both continuity and change.

#### AGENCY BEYOND LANGUAGE AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Notions of choice and freedom are common in actor-centred accounts of social life. We should therefore keep in mind that far from all action is chosen in a conscious sense. Much of what we do is based on habit and convention, and in most situations it does not occur to us that we could have acted differently. In an extremely influential, but convoluted work on the organisation of society, Pierre Bourdieu (1977 [1972]; see also Ortner 1984) discusses the relationship between reflexivity or self-consciousness, action and society. Like the other theorists discussed in this section, he wishes to move beyond entrenched positions in social science and provides a critical review of positions he deems inadequate. In a discussion of interpretive anthropology (particularly the American school of ethnomethodology), he stresses that one should not 'put forward one's contribution to the science of pre-scientific representation of the social world as if it were a science of the social world' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 23). And he continues:

Only by constructing the objective curves (price curves, chances of access to higher education, laws of the matrimonial market, etc.) is one able to pose the question of the mechanisms through which the relationship is established between the structures and the practices or the representations which accompany them. (1977, p. 23)

In other words, for a full understanding of society, it is not enough to understand the emic categories and representations of society. Indeed, at least in this regard Bourdieu comes close to Evans-Pritchard's research programme, which consisted of studying the relationship between emic meanings and social structure.

Bourdieu's concept of culturally conditioned agency has been extremely influential. He uses the term 'habitus' (originally used by Mauss in a similar way) to describe enduring, learnt, embodied dispositions for action. The habitus is inscribed into the bodies and minds of humans as an internalised, implicit programme for action. At one point, Bourdieu defines it as 'the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisation' (1977, p. 78). The habitus can also be described as embodied culture, and being prior to self-conscious reflection it sets limits to thought and chosen action. Through habitus, the socially created world appears as natural and is taken for granted. It therefore has strong ideological implications as well as cultural ones, and, we should note, it refers to a layer of social reality that lies beyond the intentional. Informants cannot describe their habitus in the course of an interview, even if they want to. Drawing on his own fieldwork as well as recent research in neuroscience, Robert Borofsky (1994) confirms Bourdieu's perspective by distinguishing between *implicit* and *explicit* knowledge. Implicit memory, which is unintentional and not conscious, cannot be reproduced verbally, but is nevertheless a form of cultural competence which informs action.

In several of his books on epistemology, Bourdieu criticises social scientists for overestimating the importance of representations and reflexivity in their comparative studies of society and culture. This cognitive, and especially linguistic, bias, Bourdieu argues, is characteristic of our occupational specialisation and tends to lead us to ignore the fact that the social world is largely made up of institutionalised practices and not by informants' statements. Other anthropologists (such as Bloch 1991) have also pointed out that the social world is under-determined by language; in other words, that there are large areas of social life and of cognition which are not only non-linguistic, but which cannot easily be 'translated' into language. The transmission of knowledge and skills, Maurice Bloch (1991) argues, consistently with Connerton, frequently takes place without recourse to language. Many cultural skills can only be explained by showing them in practice. In other words, if an over-reliance on interviews is a methodological pitfall, an overestimation of the linguistic character of the social world is an epistemological error.

We have now introduced some of the most fundamental theoretical issues of social science, including anthropology. It should be noted that after the critique of structural-functionalism in the 1960s, anthropology has made a distinctive move in two directions: first, there has been a shift from emphasis on structure to emphasis on process. Change is now seen as an inherent quality of social systems, not as an anomaly. Second, there has been a no less significant shift from the study of function to the interpretation of meaning. As an implication, anthropology has, in the eyes of many, moved away from the social sciences in the direction of the humanities. Be this as it may, it is beyond doubt that contemporary anthropologists often are cautious of positing explanatory accounts of social processes, and concentrate instead on understanding and translation.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Fredrik Barth: *Models of Social Organization*. London: Royal Anthropological Institute, Occasional Papers, no. 23 (1966).  
 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann: *The Social Construction of Reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967.  
 Mary Douglas: *How Institutions Think*. London: Routledge 1987.  
 Anthony Giddens: *Central Problems in Social Theory*. London: Macmillan 1979.

## 7 KINSHIP AS DESCENT

No society (I believe) is bloody-minded enough to ban sex from marriage, and there is an obvious convenience in combining the two; but sex without marriage one can have and one does.

— Robin Fox

Generations of anthropologists have been flabbergasted at the intricate kinship systems existing in many 'primitive' societies. Several famous examples of such complicated systems are to be found in the Australian aboriginal population. These peoples, traditionally hunters and gatherers, have the simplest technology in the world. They lack metals, domesticated animals and writing, and in most cases they do not even have the rudiments of agriculture. Nonetheless, many of these nomadic groups have kinship systems so complex that it may take an outsider years to comprehend them fully. They can name a large number of different kinds of relatives, they have accurate rules determining who can marry whom, and the groups are subdivided into moieties, clans and sub-clans.

The study of kinship has always been a core topic in anthropology. Towards the end of the 1940s kinship was so central, especially in British social anthropology, that despairing lay people (and students) spoke ironically of the subject as 'kinshipology'. Many non-anthropologists have reacted with incomprehension at the great interest in kinship still prevalent in the profession.

What is it about kinship that makes it so important? The simple answer is that in very many societies kinship is the single most important social institution. The kin group, in many cases, takes care of one's livelihood, one's career, one's marriage, one's protection and one's social identity. Chapter 4 offered a first glimpse of the importance of kinship, and indicated that there is a close interrelationship between the kinship system and other aspects of social organisation. In some cases, what anthropologists delineate as the kinship system may indeed be coexistent with social organisation, since the members of society, and most of their activities, may first and foremost be organised along kinship principles.

There are many social ways of organising, and thinking about, kinship. Although it is a widespread cultural notion in 'Western' societies that kinship is related to biology and blood ties (Schneider 1984), anthropological research generally analyses it as cultural classifications of people and as