

**STRUCTURE VERSUS HUMAN AGENCY:  
A METHODOLOGICAL DEBATE IN SOCIAL THEORY**

Thesis submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
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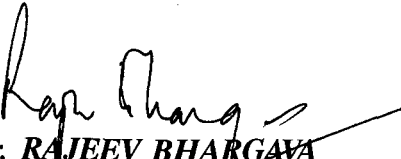
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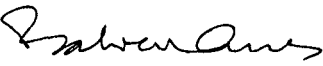
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***CERTIFICATE***

*Certified that the thesis entitled **STRUCTURE VERSUS HUMAN AGENCY: A METHODOLOGICAL DEBATE IN SOCIAL THEORY**, submitted by **PRABHAT RANJAN** for the degree of **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY** has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university and is his own work.*

*We recommend that the thesis be placed before the examiners for evaluation.*

  
**Dr. RAJEEV BHARGAVA**  
Supervisor

  
**PROF. BALVEER ARORA**  
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**Prabhat Ranjan**

## INTRODUCTION

The thesis seeks to establish the extent to which the two perspectives of structural explanation and intentional understanding are compatible with one another. The aim is not to blur real differences, setting in their place a shallow syncretism, but no worthwhile social theory can do without variants of both perspectives. There has been diverse attempt to deal with the problematic of structuring by which is meant the real relationship of structure and action, the structural conditioning of action and the effects of action on structure.

The relation between structure and agency has come to assume an increasing importance because of the growing preoccupation with explaining processes of historical change. This issue has been placed firmly at the top of the agenda for social theory by the recent emergence of analytical Marxism<sup>1</sup> which treats individual action as primary, reducing social structures to the consequences of such action.

The founding text of this philosophical current is G.A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History-a Defence*. For Cohen '...history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall accordingly as they enable or impede that growth'.<sup>2</sup> He therefore accords primacy to the productive forces and insists accordingly that 'Marxism is *fundamentally* concerned not with behaviour, but with the forces and relations constraining and directing it'.<sup>3</sup> For him, structure takes priority over agency in the explanation of historical change. However, many other analytical Marxists, most notably, Jon Elster and John Roemer have opted instead for the doctrine of methodological individualism. According to it, social structures are the unintended consequences of individual human action. But the main problem with this approach is that it mistakenly and unwittingly accords primacy to the productive

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<sup>1</sup> For a representative selection, see J. Roemer ed., *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History-a Defence* (Oxford, 1978), pp.ix, x.

<sup>3</sup> G.A. Cohen, 'Reply to Elster on "Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory",' *Theory and Society*, 11:4 (1982), p.489.

capacities of individuals in the development and emergence of the 'conditions' under which they act.

'Action' and 'structure' normally appear in both the sociological and philosophical literature as antinomies. The antinomy also figures prominently in Marxist philosophies. In fact, Karl Marx's writings still represent the most significant single fund of ideas that can be drawn up in seeking to illuminate problems of human agency and structure. Anderson has argued that this 'has always constituted one of the central problems of historical materialism'. He points to

the permanent oscillation, the potential disjuncture in Marx's own writings between his ascription of the primary motor of historical change to the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, on the one hand... and to the class struggle, on the other hand.... The first refers essentially to a structural, or more properly interstructural, reality: the order of what contemporary sociology would call system integration (or for Marx latent disintegration). The second refers to the subjective forces contending and colliding for mastery over social forms and historical processes: the realm of what contemporary sociology would call social integration (which is equally disintegration or reintegration). How are these two distinct types of causality, or principles of explanation, to be articulated in the theory of historical materialism?<sup>4</sup>

The present thesis sets out to answer this question. Althusser's failure to do so correctly is one of the main reasons for the collapse of his philosophical enterprise. Conceiving history as 'a process without a subject', he treated human agents as the 'bearers' or 'supports' of objective structures and subjectivity itself as a construct of ideology. While Althusserian Marxism undoubtedly helped to stimulate concrete historical studies by providing certain tools of analysis, its reduction of agency to structure denied it the means to conceptualize struggle and change. One of the main attractions of the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida et al., which arose amid the ruins of Althusserianism, was surely its openness to the contingencies, the uncertainties, the instabilities of history.

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<sup>4</sup> P. Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London, 1983), p.34.

The Marxist conception of human agents as entering into relations 'independently of their will' is generally true of historical periods prior to the emergence of the modern proletariat, when individuals were usually the victims of circumstance, and classes were not self-conscious and active forces in history. It is to this historical past that Althusser's structural determinism is more appropriate.

But it is not simply a matter of adjusting the proportions of agency and structure to account adequately for the conditions of different historical periods. But, as Anderson partly recognises, the duality of 'agency' and 'structure' itself has to be questioned.

To begin with the concept of agency, two questionable assumptions are made. First, that historical change, if it is to be explained at all, has to be explained in terms of voluntary agency, and connectedly, that all agency is, or is reducible to individual human agency.

The notion of 'ever-baffled and ever-resurgent agents of an unmastered history'<sup>5</sup> captures the importance of unintended consequences. But it does not avoid the problem that much of the work of history is done 'behind the backs' of human agents.

External structures exert determinate 'pressures', but the interpretation of these pressures and the action which results occurs in a realm of free play allowed by external conditions. These conditions thus 'shape' and 'exert pressure', whilst not wholly determining action. Therefore, human agency is not the immediate source of all historical change.

It is precisely the unsatisfactory character of this philosophical conception of human subjectivity and agency that motivates structuralist approaches to explanation in the human sciences, but in general, where structuralism leaves intact this philosophical conception of subjectivity and intentional action, simply 'decentring' it, theoretical difficulties re-emerge. In Althusser's case, these difficulties take the form of a retention of subjectivity as an 'imaginary' relation which nevertheless has effects, and of agency as mere fulfilment of functional requirements of the social system. So long as the opposition between structure and agency governs theorising about historical causality, the

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<sup>5</sup> E.P.Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978), p.280.

extremes of structural fatalism and vacuous voluntarism can be avoided only by arbitrary combination of the two.

In fact, both positions<sup>6</sup> founder on ontological and epistemological confusions and suffer from a lack of distinction between levels of analysis. It is perfectly possible to speak of individuals within wider parameters than simply their functions as agents or bearers of objective structures (roles) without lapsing into a reductionism which fallaciously assumes that the motivation of actors is the fundamental mechanism behind the operation or genesis of objective, institutionalized social structures.

The difficulty is how to think of the relation between the two without dissolving the structures into subjectivity or reducing the agency to the 'supports' of a process without a subject. *This is the Central research question around which the entire thesis revolves.*

The source of a philosophical tradition in which the self is the starting point is Descartes' assertion of the ultimate cognitive primacy and self-transparency of the contents of consciousness. In this unmediated presence of the self to itself is to be found the certainty by which all other knowledge-claims are to be measured. Descartes' epistemological reconstruction of the world of external objects and other selves on the basis of this certainty, and under the guarantee provided by God the non-deceiver, can also be taken as the source of a philosophical tradition in which the self is the starting point not just for knowledge, but for the constitution of the world itself. The philosophical 'subject' is here the self-subsistent source of knowledge of the 'object' which it simultaneously constitutes. This philosophical legacy passes through the work of Hegel and into the earlier work of Marx and by a different route passes into the phenomenological and existential Marxism.

On the other hand, Comte and, above all, Durkheim represent a nineteenth century tradition for which human subjects are constituted by their social milieu. The consciousness of the individual subject is made up of representations in which the

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<sup>6</sup> The allotment of explanatory or causal primacy to individual choice and agency or social constraints.



imperatives of an external social order are internally inscribed. Subjectivity does not carry with it the means of its own intelligibility, objectivity, so far as it is obtainable has to be established in opposition to the 'pre-notions' through which the actor lives his or her social existence. Social science must relate to its object much as the natural sciences relate to theirs: as an external facticity. The inheritors of this alternative paradigm of knowledge and of subjectivity as socially constituted, rather than constitutive have been, in the twentieth century, the diverse 'functionalist' and 'structuralist' currents of social thought.

### **The Plan of the Thesis**

First of all, some remarks on the two key terms: Human Agency and Structure.

The connotation of the term human agency has of the operation of causal powers in the physical as well as the human world. One central fact about human beings is that they are embodied agents. Their intentional activities flow from the capacities they possess and are intelligible in the light of the needs they share as members of the same natural species.

To view human beings as animals of a certain kind capable of engaging in a range of intentional activities is in no sense to endorse an epistemology in which the subject is the foundation of knowledge or the source of meaning. But it is still to conceive human beings as centres capable of initiating action rather than as bundles of drives and desires constructed within social relations.

Thus I distinguish my account of agency from the 'philosophy of subject' central to the Western philosophy from Descartes through Kant to Husserl. Here 'subject' is conceived as a disembodied self and is the self-subsistent source of knowledge of the 'object' which it simultaneously constitutes.

The term 'structure' has been used in an explanatory rather than a descriptive way, that is, it refers to underlying generative mechanisms which give rise to certain observable manifestations. Thus the definition veers away from the idea that structure denotes a 'framework of actually existing relations' which are amenable to us through

'direct observation'.<sup>7</sup> However, the distinction between explanation and description is neither a clear-cut nor uncontested one and often the two shade into one another.

Although the explanatory notion of structure is often associated with structuralism, the present usage departs from the emphasis to be found in structuralist writers like Levi-Strauss, who are concerned to discover the abstract principles of order and organisation that govern social life. Thus the structures that I discuss in the thesis have nothing to do with innate structures of the human brain (Levi-Strauss, Chomsky, Piaget).

Instead, I shall be dealing with structures (forces and relations of production), which can be said to generate social interaction. They are the most basic structural features of social formations. Marx's forces/relations of production scheme may be read as asserting the universal primacy of allocation over authorisation, both in the constitution of society and in the dynamics of social change. The fact that if structures (as I use the term) are to be seen as mechanisms which in some sense generate interaction, then they cannot be understood as disembodied principles of social organisation. Hence the way in which I am using the term would be to say that structures are the socially structured, and sometimes preconstituted, conditions of action where 'conditions' are to be understood as generative rather than simply descriptive, mediating elements of the environment of human action.

The first two chapters are concerned with the two main terms of the problem - human agency and structure. Chapter 1 considers briefly different senses of historical agency, then focuses on the most subtle and plausible account of human action, the 'orthodox conception of agents' refined by the analytical tradition, according to which human beings act rationally in the light of beliefs and desires. After dismissing some bad arguments for this theory, I point to a good one, namely that it issues from the kind of account of human nature which the inadequacies of post-structuralism show that we need. Finally, I argue that the orthodox conception of agents is consistent with invoking structures to help explain human action.

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<sup>7</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London & Henley, 1952), p.190.

Chapter 2 begins with some very general remarks on the purpose of the concept of social structure, followed by a consideration of the concrete theory of structure provided by historical materialism, a critical discussion of Cohen's 'orthodox' historical materialism and an account of the 'rational-choice Marxism' of Elster. The latter's methodological individualism is then examined at length, and the dilemma of structure and action rejected in favour of an account of the powers that agents derive from their position in the relations of production.

Chapter 3 examines some of the theoretical problems arising from the interaction of structure and agency, commencing with an account of the formidable challenge to any generalizing social theory represented by the hermeneutic tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer. One recent attempt, by W.G. Runciman, to reconcile this tradition's preoccupation with the interpretation of human action with the identification of causal patterns, is then shown to be unsuccessful. I argue, however, that Donald Davidson's realist theory of interpretation, introduced here to help refute Runciman, captures what is valid in the hermeneutic tradition, is superior to Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and is consistent with the general theory of structure and agency developed in chapters 1 and 2. The utilitarian theory of action underpinning rational-choice theory is then held to be wanting, above all because of the narrowly instrumental conception of rationality it uses to explain human behaviour but the concept of interests, now conceived as the hinge connecting structure and action, is retained from that theory.

Chapter 4 begins by introducing the concept of collective agents such as classes and nations. The formation of such collectivities depends crucially on the beliefs agents have, which raises the question of ideology. I defend a more modest, but still important role for ideologies as articulations of interests and the means by which agents are invited to accept a certain identity ('interpellated').

Chapter 5 deals with the work of some writers who have contributed to the resolution of the theoretical problem of the interaction/structure relation. Writers such as Berger and Luckmann, and Bourdieu have asserted that actors and their interactions can be understood to be at one and the same time creative of, and created by, objective features of society.

Similarly, Giddens's idea of the duality of structure amounts to much the same thing, except that in Giddens's formulation there is greater stress on the proposition that structures<sup>8</sup> only exist in their instantiation.

But the net effect of such a strategy is to emasculate the concept of structure, and thus to adopt an ontology of interaction and an epistemology geared exclusively to its explication. They engage in a sophisticated form of reductionism and empiricism. That is, the conflation of (contextual) structure with action, by the conceptualization of this kind of structure as an effect or product of action.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the argument and ends with illustrating the fundamental theme: structure and agency are inextricably intertwined so that to explicate one is to explicate the other. To separate either and give it primacy over the other is a fundamental error. The solution lies in understanding how action involves the exercise of structural capacities and structures are related to agents' conscious experiences by the notion of interests without reducing either to the other.

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<sup>8</sup> Which, however, Giddens defines in a quite different way from the former authors.

## CHAPTER I

# SUBJECTS AND AGENTS

The chapter considers briefly different senses of historical agency, then focuses on the most subtle and plausible account of human action, the 'orthodox conception of agents' refined by the analytical tradition, according to which human beings act rationally in the light of beliefs and desires.

I distinguish my account of agency from the 'philosophy of subject' central to the western philosophical tradition from Descartes through Kant to Husserl where 'subject' is primarily a thinking being (hence disembodied) and is the self-subsistent source of knowledge of the 'object' which it simultaneously constitutes. Here the philosophical 'subject' is abstracted from the necessarily socially and historically located character of human beings. Foucault, Althusser and others embrace theoretical anti-humanism because they operate with this philosophical notion of the 'subject'.

The connotation of the term human agent has of the operation of causal powers in the physical as well as the human world. One central fact about human beings is that they are embodied beings, whose intentional activities flow from capacities they possess and are intelligible in the light of the needs they share as members of the same natural species.

To view human beings as animals of a certain kind capable of engaging in a range of intentional activities is in no sense to endorse an epistemology in which the 'subject' is the foundation of knowledge or the source of meaning. But it is still to conceive human beings as centres capable of initiating action rather than as bundles of drives and desires constructed within social relations.

I suggest that the orthodox conception of agents is best seen as part of a broader account of human nature, one which, as Norman Geras puts it, treats human beings as, 'like all other species, material and natural beings, "irredeemably" rooted in a given biological constitution, absolutely continuous with the rest of the natural world.'<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> N.Geras, *Marx and Human Nature* (London, 1983), p.97.

discontinuity implied in the use of intentional explanations, ascribing beliefs and desires to human agents on the assumption of their rationality, is to be seen as a consequence of this 'given biological constitution, rather than as marking an unbridgeable chasm separating the human and the natural.

### **The Philosophy of 'Subject'**

The Cartesian programme originates in a search for certain, indubitable propositions. Merely reliable or commonly accepted or well-confirmed propositions are insufficient; only those which cannot be doubted or for which doubt is unintelligible constitute genuine knowledge. This standard is extremely high, and *prima facie* it removes most empirical truths, most common sense, and even some formal truths from the realm of knowledge. Armed with this standard, the skeptic can cast aspersion on nearly everything the ordinary person accepts.

Despite this decimation of knowledge, Descartes discovers one realm where his standard is satisfied: the realm of one's own mental states. When one is doubting (or thinking), one cannot intelligibly doubt that one is doubting (or thinking). One's mental states are translucent; one seems to have so unmediated a relation to them that no margin for error exists. One does not have this direct, diaphanous relation to any other object of knowledge, and thus no other realm of objects is known as well as one's mental states. Moreover, nothing else has this privileged relationship to one's own states; they constitute a realm of private access which no one else can penetrate. Only this realm is truly, genuinely known.

In addition, Descartes takes mental states to be similar to properties in that they must have an object to modify or a substance in which to inhere; they are not self-sufficient. All experiences must be modifications of individual minds; they exist only in so far as they are possessed and apprehended by an owner, a self. Consequently, the certainty of one's own mental states entails the certain existence of a self that possesses them and that remains identical through their changes. This self is taken to be within the body and 'behind' each mental act-looking out over its shoulder to see what it reveals.

Since this self is a substance, it is self-sufficient and unaltered by the mental states which qualify it.

The self is typically conceived to be prior to experience and to have a special relation to its own experiences which guarantees its privileged access to them. This relation also individuates one person's act of thinking from another's and ties each mental act to one single person. This self depends on nothing else for its existence. The entire external world may be illusory, and the self would still exist as the necessary possessor of the mental acts which apprehend these illusions. Since the core of a person is his self, and since the self has this self-sufficient, hermetic character, this component of the Cartesian picture is termed 'the monad view of the self (or person)'.

Privileged access entails two other important consequences. First, a sharp distinction between mind and body is instituted because one's physiological and somatic states are not known directly. One conceives mind and body as wholly distinct spheres, each having its own elements and laws, each intersecting and interacting with the other in mysterious ways. One's bodily existence becomes supplementary and dispensable because one's mental life does not seem to require the existence of a body. The importance of that which allows one to act on the world is diminished when the status of that world becomes dubious.

In addition, the privileged access position creates a chasm between the mental state that appears to oneself and the bodily expression or behaviour that appears to others. The mental is inner, primary, superior, veridical, and essentially related to oneself; mere behaviour is outer, derivative, inferior, susceptible to misinterpretation and error, and only tangentially related to oneself. Other people can apprehend only this outer 'clothing' of the true inner state. The relation of one to the other is contingent; thus, the other apprehends only inadequate and cryptic signs of one's inner states. Many outer signs are unrelated to inner states, and many inner states do not manifest themselves in behaviour. For the other, one's outer expressions are already dubious because they are external to his mental acts, but they are doubly problematic because they are secondary

and inadequate representations of one's inner states. This position creates a sense of unbridgeable distance between self and other.<sup>2</sup>

Kant believes that we acquire knowledge through sense experience<sup>3</sup> and knowledge filters through Categories of understanding which are given and universal and which pre-exist the individual knower. That is, they exist independently of the content to which they are applied. Thus, knowing for him is an activity, imposing forms on things. The 'I' (transcendental subject) that imposes the forms on the world cannot be known by the principles of knowing which exclude the living thing, and man as a living-knowing organism in a world of living organisms. But Kant gets stuck at the Cartesian world view in the end: distinguishing still between an outer and an inner sense: between the world spread out in space, independent of the secret thoughts, the 'modes' of consciousness, of feelings, ideas and volitions, within.

Husserl accepts the challenge to discover absolutely certain foundations on which philosophy can erect a genuine science. In addition, he thinks occurrent mental states are directly intuited and that the self is a self-sufficient monad. However, Husserl thinks that there is a third realm of entities, in addition to mental acts and natural objects, to which our access can be adequate once certain procedures are undertaken. These procedures require neutralizing presuppositions about what exists and investigating the resulting appearances just as they appear. Once executed, these procedures reveal a realm of 'senses' through which objects are apprehended, meanings through which objects appear in particular ways. Husserl's task is to examine the relations between mental acts and their corresponding senses.

He explores the processes through which certain entities come to appear as conscious beings, how the sense 'other conscious subject' becomes constituted.

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<sup>2</sup> This point is similar to an objection Sartre makes to what he calls 'realism' in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. and with an introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956), p.223.

<sup>3</sup> The external world has a real existence independent of our mind.



Husserl demonstrates that many other senses which operate in everyday perception presuppose the sense 'other conscious being'. For example, to perceive a desk as objectively present requires, according to Husserl, that one perceive it as being simultaneously perceivable by others, and since this requirement invokes the sense 'other conscious being', that sense must already be constituted. If it could not be constituted, the character of ordinary perception would be impoverished. Husserl thus indicates a new range of difficulties that arise when the sense 'other conscious being' is rendered inoperative. A serious Cartesian would be left with only the most austere forms of experience.

Thus, despite his Cartesianism, Husserl transcends the traditional approach to others both by stressing the foundational character of the sense 'other conscious being' and by formulating a question that is prior to questions of both existence and knowledge: how senses are constituted. One can address Husserl's question even if others do not in fact exist, and in order to know (to verify, establish) the existence of others, one must first be capable of perceiving something as another conscious being. Even though Husserl accepts most of the tenets of the Cartesian picture, he is able to fashion an alternative problematic. Husserl's work is suggestive enough to establish some new directions, yet Cartesian enough to provoke dramatic reactions.

Hegel genuinely supersedes the Cartesian picture. He makes no effort to prove that others exist or to justify the knowledge one has of them; he simply assumes that other living, desiring beings exist and are apprehended. His central assertion is that only through encountering such beings can one achieve complete self-consciousness. Nearly every capacity that makes a person human (his reason, his ethical life, his self-expressive production) requires the existence of others in order to become actualised. Others participate in the constitution of one's personhood, and vice versa. The manner in which one is related to others determines the mode in which one exists. Thus, Hegel opposes the monad view of the self; although a primitive sense of self is possible without others, a rich developed self requires their existence and recognition. Although human-like organisms may exist in isolation, persons are ontologically interlocked.

Hegel investigates the basic aim, pattern, and conditions governing interpersonal interaction by analyzing the basic event that occurs when self-conscious beings encounter one another. This investigation opens an entirely new area of inquiry for philosophy. For Hegel, the aim of interpersonal relations is recognition, and the kind of recognition one achieves is dependent on one's orientation to others. Either one experiences an essential identity with them, or one retains a sense of separateness. If the latter, one cannot achieve recognition even though one may achieve temporary domination. If one transcends one's sense of differentiation, one can attain mutual recognition - a level of consciousness in which one experiences oneself as a member of the species. Recognition creates a supporting milieu, a larger totality that conditions one's existence. Hence, the quality of one's relationship to others determines the kind or level of existence one can achieve.

The central implication of Hegel's position is that Cartesian self-examination, even if done thoroughly, will be insufficient to fully clarify the structures of mental life because those structures change and develop. Recognition alters the nature of one's experience. Thus, Cartesian reflection that was performed prior to recognition would fail to elucidate, and would inadequately comprehend, an entire level of experience. This is Hegel's first challenge to the assertion that immediate self-knowledge is always the most complete and adequate kind of knowledge.

His second challenge emerges from his contention that each form of conscious life breaks down and develops into another because when it seriously evaluates its experience with its own standard of adequacy, it finds itself wanting. Once this lack is apprehended, that form of consciousness disintegrates and transforms in a new one. Although each form of consciousness begins with an immediate certainty that it satisfies its standard, it gradually discovers its mistake. Consequently, most forms of consciousness fail to know themselves adequately despite their introspective capacities. For Hegel, genuine self-knowledge requires 'experience', and experience involves tragedy, disillusionment, and disintegration.

Hegel offers yet a third challenge to the Cartesian privileged-access view. He contends that only through self-externalization can a self-conscious being come to

understand itself. Though introspection is possible, its results are impoverished. One learns one's nature only through actions, productions, and interactions. The expression concretizes and provides content to self-consciousness. Thus, the way in which self-consciousness comes to understand itself is not in principle different from the way it understands others. In each case, one comprehends and integrates the expressions in which self-consciousness makes itself determinate.

Hence, in addition to challenging the privileged-access view of mental states in three distinct ways, Hegel reorients the philosophical problematic of others and mounts a powerful case for rejecting the monad view of the self.

### **The Concept of Human Agency**

'Men make history, but they do not make it just as they please: they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'.<sup>4</sup>

This is Marx's most important statement of the relationship between structure and subject. The solution it offers to the problem is that 'circumstances' operate primarily through setting limits to individual or collective action, restricting the range of alternatives open to agents. The formula suffers from a fundamental flaw because it conceives the role of structure as essentially negative. The structure is simply a constraint on action. There is, however, a further difficulty regarding the ambiguous way in which Marx seems to conceive of agency.

Perry Anderson suggests that we can distinguish three ways in which human beings can be said to 'make history', each involving a different sort of goal for their activity. The first and most typical form of historical action is the pursuit of 'private' goals - 'cultivation of a plot, choice of a marriage, exercise of a skill, maintenance of a home, bestowal of a name'. The second kind of agency, like the first, operates within the framework of existing social relations, pertaining to the kind of ventures involving

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K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, XI, pp.103-4.

'public' goals. For example, 'political struggles, military conflicts, diplomatic transactions, commercial explorations', that are the stuff of conventional narrative history.

Finally, there is the 'unprecedented form of agency' involved in the collective pursuit of global social transformation, which, first appeared in the American and French Revolutions but acquired full expression only with the emergence of the workers' movement and revolutionary Marxism: here, 'for the first time collective projects of social transformation were married to systematic efforts to understand the processes of past and present, to produce a premeditated future'.<sup>5</sup>

Perry Anderson calls the Russian Revolution 'the inaugural incarnation of a new kind of history, founded on an unprecedented form of agency' - 'self-determination' - i.e. 'those collective projects which have sought to render their initiators authors of their collective mode of existence as a whole, in a conscious programme aimed at creating or remodelling whole social structures'.<sup>6</sup>

The point of these distinctions is to overcome the abstract polarity between structure and agency (represented by Althusser and Thompson respectively). For Althusser history is 'a process without a subject or goals'. Change occurs as a result of the accumulation of structural contradictions. The role of human beings within this process is merely to act as 'bearers' of the structures in conflict. People's conception of themselves as agents participating in historical struggles does not correspond to reality, but arises from their formation within ideology as subjects, constituted by the illusion of their coherence and autonomy. Thompson's response to this 'theoretical anti-humanism' is essentially to affirm the opposite. History is the process through which human beings constantly make and remake their lives. Structures (modes of production) represent limits to human practice. They are obstacles to be overcome by men and women in their struggle to assume conscious control of the social world. The task of the historian is to uncover the eternal conflict between human agents and the objective conditions of their actions.

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<sup>5</sup> P. Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London, 1980), pp.19-20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

In his commentary, Perry Anderson attempts both a conceptual clarification and an historical relativisation of the issues at stake between E.P. Thompson and Althusser.<sup>7</sup> He says both operate with universal philosophical concepts of agency, each of which articulates opposed meanings of the term in everyday speech. Sometimes we speak of 'free agents' as the spontaneous source of their own actions and initiatives, but also we may speak of 'agents' as the instruments of an external force (as in 'foreign agent'). What Althusser's philosophical and structuralist adoption of the latter conception achieves is an inability to conceive historical change as the consciously willed outcome of a social movement: if Socialism is to be possible at all it must be brought about 'behind the backs' of those whose struggle brings it about, and they must continue to live their history as 'subjects' in the element of imaginary misrecognition. But, by contrast, what Thompson's obverse philosophical schema commits him to is a reading back into history of the specificity of modern social movements.

For Anderson, the Marxist conception of human agents as entering into relations 'independently of their will' is generally true of historical periods prior to the emergence of the modern proletariat, when individuals were usually the victims of circumstance, and classes were not self-conscious and active forces in history. It is to this historical past that Althusser's structural determinism is more appropriate.

But Anderson's commentary does not take us far enough. It is not simply a matter of adjusting the proportions of agency and structure to account adequately for the conditions of different historical periods. But, as Anderson partly recognises, the duality of 'agency' and 'structure' itself has to be questioned.

For Anderson, the resolution of this debate lies in the recognition that the scope for human action depends on historically specific conditions. Althusser's structuralism and Thompson's theoretical humanism may each, in particular circumstances, be true. Grasping this depends, however, on making the appropriate conceptual discriminations between different kinds of action: 'The two antagonistic formulae of a 'natural-human process without a subject' and 'ever-baffled, ever-resurgent agents of an unmastered practice' are both claims of an essentially apodictic and speculative character - eternal

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<sup>7</sup> P. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, p.18.

axioms that in no way help us to trace the actual, variable roles of different types of deliberate venture, personal or collective, in history. A historical, as opposed to an axiomatic approach to the problem would seek to trace the curve of such enterprises, which has risen sharply - in terms of mass participation and scale of the objective - in the last two centuries, from previously low levels'.<sup>8</sup>

The distinctions drawn by Anderson - between routine conduct, public initiatives and self-determination - are helpful. They provide a corrective to other invocations of undifferentiated 'agency' against structures than Thompson's. Thus Anthony Giddens writes: "Foucault's 'archaeology', in which human beings do not make their own history but are swept along by it, does not adequately acknowledge that those subject to the power of dominant groups themselves are knowledgeable agents, who resist, blunt or actively alter the conditions of life that others seek to thrust upon them."<sup>9</sup>

Giddens's failure to discriminate between kinds of agency in the way Anderson does leads him to ignore the fact that there are two very different ways in which the resistance of subordinate groups may 'actively alter' their 'conditions of life'. Change may arise as an unintended consequence of molecular acts of resistance. But the change may not be consciously initiated by or benefit the resisters. Resistance, however, may also generate collective agents capable of pursuing the conscious goal of social change. Action in pursuit of such collective projects of transformation will have unanticipated consequences, but here it is possible to appraise the outcome in the light of its distance from the goal originally and consciously espoused. Discussions of the Russian Revolution and its fate are an obvious example of this kind of appraisal. Individual action is often self-defeating, but rarely outside Napoleonic fantasies does this failure take the form of the shipwreck of some attempt to achieve social change. Such attempts usually involve a degree of collective organization.

Valuable though, Anderson's discussion of agency therefore is, it nevertheless has a major lacuna. He does not consider in any depth what the different forms of agency

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<sup>8</sup> P. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), pp. 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> A. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (London, 1981), p.172.

have in common, beyond defining agency as 'conscious, goal-directed activity.'<sup>10</sup> But it is the nature and implications of agency thus conceived that are at the centre of most of the debates about the status and character of social science in the past years. The most influential tradition in mainstream social theory, that associated with Max Weber, has argued for the primacy of agency over structures<sup>11</sup> precisely on the grounds that human beings are distinguished from the rest of nature by their engaging in 'conscious, goal-directed activity.'<sup>12</sup> Similar considerations are among those which lead to the emergence of 'Rational-Choice Marxism'. It is that species of analytical Marxism which espouses methodological individualism (Jon Elster, John Roemer et al.).

In what follows, I shall first consider the model of human action that underpins the Weberian argument and establish that such a way of thinking about human beings, as acting in the light of beliefs and desires, could only be formulated in definite historical conditions. Nevertheless, the theory is, I believe, true, in part because of the kind of account of human nature that we must accept. Nevertheless, viewing human beings as acting for reasons and in that sense goal - directed, does not require that we accept methodological individualism.

### **The Orthodox Conception of Agents**

The broad outlines of the argument for methodological individualism have changed little since Weber's time, although it has been much refined by analytical philosophers. Elster writes: 'Intentional explanation is the feature that distinguishes the social sciences from the natural sciences'.<sup>13</sup> To explain an action intentionally is to ascribe to the agent beliefs and desires which caused him so to act. Thus, an agent desires that p, believes that doing x will bring it about that p, and therefore does x.

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), p.19.

<sup>11</sup> In the sense that the structures are to be conceived simply as the unintended consequences of individual action.

<sup>12</sup> See, M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley, 1978), Part One Ch. 1.

<sup>13</sup> J. Elster, *Explaining Technical Change* (Cambridge, 1983), p.69.

Intentional explanation involves distinguishing human action in certain respects from the rest of nature : ‘Intentional behaviour is essentially related to the future. It is action guided by a goal that is absent, not-yet-realized, merely imagined or represented. As noted by Francois Jacob, men can choose between unactualized possibles, whereas natural selection can choose only among the actual alternatives’.<sup>14</sup> Obviously this presupposes some account of the distinct properties of human agents.

The notion of an intentional system is an explanatory concept. Predictions about people’s conduct can be derived from it by means of explanations of the following form: ‘If someone desires something, and believes that by A-ing he can best get it, and other things are equal, then he A’s’.<sup>15</sup> Crucial to the explanatory character of ascriptions of belief and desire is the first condition of personhood. That is, people are rational.

Packed in here are in fact two distinct, though related conceptions of rationality. The first one could call the interpretive. Current discussion of it is dominated by the work of Donald Davidson.<sup>16</sup> My account of it here will be summary, but I shall return to it in chapter 3. The thought is that intentional explanation is an interpretive process, inseparable from assigning a sense to the actor’s utterances. But people’s observable behaviour typically admits of more than one interpretation. How do we know which beliefs and desires to assign to others? Only by relying on a normative principle of rationality. We get round the "privacy" of beliefs and desires by recognizing that in general anyone’s beliefs and desires must be those he "ought to have" given the circumstances. The assumption that agents are rational specifies what beliefs and desires they ‘ought to have’.

Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit break down this assumption as follows. First, we should treat agents as ‘attitudinally rational’, that is, ‘disposed at least to change one’s

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<sup>14</sup> J. Elster, *Explaining Technical Change*, p.71. The reference is to F. Jacob, *The Logic of Living Systems* (London, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> P. Pettit, ‘A Priori Principles and Action- Explanation’, *Analysis*, 46:1 (1986), p.39.

<sup>16</sup> See, D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980); and *Inquiries in Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984).



beliefs so as to eliminate counter-examples and inconsistencies'. In other words, 'to make moves to ensure that... [one's] beliefs were true'.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, agents must be regarded as 'behaviourally rational', acting in the light of their beliefs and desires so that if someone desires that p, believes that doing x will bring it about that p and other things are equal (there are no conflicting desires etc.), then if he or she does not do x, the antecedent, with its ascription of belief and desire and ceteris paribus clause, must be false.<sup>18</sup>

The second conception of rationality is best regarded as a specification of the first. It is essentially weber's notion of instrumentally rational action, where rationality involves the selection of the most effective means to achieving a given end. Thus, to quote Elster, 'the usual way to define rational behaviour is by invoking some notion of optimization. One argues, that is, that the rational agent chooses an action which is not only a means to his end, but the best of all the means which he believes to be available'.<sup>19</sup>

This second conception of rationality (which we shall call the optimizing principle to distinguish it from the rationality principle proper) is an important one for methodological individualists. Since they explain social structures in terms of individuals they cannot invoke generalizations which make reference to the properties of social structures and the like. To do so would be to commit the crime of historicism denounced by Popper and his followers. The virtue of the optimizing principle is that it provides an explanatory generalization by means of which to animate the models of individualist social theory. These models need not confine themselves to descriptions of individuals and their circumstances, they can, given the assumption that agents optimize, and given

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<sup>17</sup> G. Macdonald and P. Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London, 1981), pp. 60, 12.

<sup>18</sup> See, Pettit, *A Priori Principles*, p.39.

<sup>19</sup> Elster, *Explaining*, p.72. See also Weber, *Economy*, pp. 24.

the beliefs and desires of the individuals concerned, explain why they do what they do.<sup>20</sup>

Although there are important connections between the optimizing principle and the assumption that agents are behaviourally and attitudinally rational, they are logically distinct propositions.<sup>21</sup> Recognizing this is important partly because it allows me to explore the implications of the sort of intentional explanations I have been considering for the truth or otherwise of methodological individualism (hereafter MI). Macdonald and Pettit argue that the 'orthodox concept of agents' involved in intentional explanation implies the truth of MI. They say that 'accepting the orthodox conception of agents means rejecting the claim that institutions have explanatory autonomy', where 'explanatory autonomy' is defined as follows: 'One sort of entity X exists over and beyond another sort Y if and only if the following condition is met: 'that the addition of terms by means of which we refer to X-type things enables us to give explanations of events, taken under certain descriptions, that we cannot account for in a language with terms for referring to Y-type items'.<sup>22</sup>

So the 'explanatory (or methodological) collectivist' holds that action cannot be explained solely in terms of individuals' properties, beliefs, desires etc., but that these explanations must also make irreducible reference to institutions (or more generally to structures: I shall give a more precise way of understanding 'structures' in chapter 2). There are two main premisses of Macdonald's and Pettit's attempted proof of this doctrine's falsehood:

- [1] If the explanatory collectivist says that there are some events which can be explained by reference to institutions, but not by reference to individuals, then he is denying the truth of the orthodox conception of agents. At least with respect

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<sup>20</sup> See K.R. Popper, 'The Rationality Principle,' in D. Miller, ed., *A Pocket Popper* (London, 1983). Given the assumption that agents optimize, and given the beliefs and desires of the individuals concerned.

<sup>21</sup> As Elster Concedes, *Explaining*, p.74.

<sup>22</sup> Macdonald and Pettit, *Semantics*, pp.125,122.

to the behaviour involved in those events he is saying that it is not the rational outcome of the agents' beliefs and desires...

[2] the claim of this conception is undeniable.<sup>23</sup>

Both these assertions are false. Establishing that [1] is not true is the most important task, since I think both that the orthodox conception of agents is true and that it does not imply MI. However, I shall only begin to address [1] towards the end of this chapter, and its falsehood can only be definitively established once my general account of the relation between structure and agency is completed at the end of chapter 3. For the present, I wish to consider only [2], which concerns the status of the orthodox conception, as a way of beginning to establish why we should think it true (although, again, that task will only be completed with the discussion of interpretation in chapter-3).

Macdonald and Pettit make out [2]<sup>24</sup> less by making explicit arguments than by drawing a contrast between 'action explanation' and explanation in the natural sciences. The latter is 'nomothetic', that is, events are explained in terms of generalizations or laws which may always in principle be revised in the light of empirical evidence. Action-explanations, however, 'postulate only indubitable explanatory principles and in the exercise there can never be a possibility of revising the principles and recasting the explanations. We approach an individual action secure in the possession of these principles: they formulate what it is for a piece of behaviour to count as an action, issuing from an appropriate rationalizing state of mind'.

Consequently, 'the social scientist concerned with making sense of a piece or pattern of behaviour is not required or allowed to turn his attention to the explanatory principles which are but at his disposal by the orthodox conception of agents. His part

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<sup>23</sup> Macdonald and Pettit *Semantics*, p.126.

<sup>24</sup> The claim that the orthodox conception of agents is 'undeniable'.

is to take these principles on faith and to devote himself exclusively to the consideration of how the behaviour can best be subsumed under them'.<sup>25</sup>

Now all this is decidedly odd. One's suspicions are aroused by the very use of the word 'indubitable', a term used by philosophers at least since Descartes's time to shore up some especially shaky assertion. In what sense is the orthodox conception 'indubitable'? Is it a logical truth? surely this cannot be Macdonald's and Pettit's claim? I think, they are making a psychological generalization, that people cannot imagine the falsehood of the orthodox conception. But this is demonstrably false.

One aspect of the orthodox conception is the idea, implicit in the notion of an intentional system, of the coherence of the agent. We explain action by ascribing beliefs and desires because the agent is capable of forming beliefs and desires. To put it another way, it is the agent, not some aspect or part of him, that has beliefs and desires. But thus conceiving the agent as in some sense a unity is certainly not indubitable.

For example, Deleuze and Guattari present a view of reality as consisting in supra-and sub-individual multiplicities whose nature changes according to the assemblage in which they find themselves: 'It is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, as multiplicity, that it loses all relationship to the One as subject or as object, as natural or spiritual reality, as image and world. There is no unity here to serve as pivot in the object, or ground of division in the subject.... A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, but only determinations, magnitudes, dimensions which cannot increase in number without its changing in nature.... An assemblage is precisely this growth of dimensions in a multiplicity which necessarily changes in nature as it augments in connections'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Pettit, *A Priori Principles*, pp.99, 103. Pettit's more recent article, 'A Priori Principles', simply restates the distinction between nomothetic and action-explanation in terms of a higher distinction between 'regularizing' and 'normalizing' explanations, where the latter seems to be simply another name for intentional explanation.

<sup>26</sup> This passage is drawn from P. Foss and P. Patton in *Ideology and Consciousness*, 8 (1981), pp. 53-4.

To conceive of the subject as an enduring and coherent unity may, on this view be faithful to the conventions of ordinary language, but it bears as much relation to the truth as does Ptolemaic astronomy. One may naturally be tempted to dismiss this as a post-structuralist stance. However, cultures seem to have existed where conceiving 'each one of us' as 'many' was deeply embedded in everyday discourse. A.W.H. Adkins argues that Homeric Greece was one such culture : '... we are accustomed to emphasize the "I" which 'takes decisions', and ideas such as 'will' or 'intention'. In Homer, there is much less emphasis on the 'I' or decisions'.<sup>27</sup>

This conception of the self has further ramifications: "...the Homeric Greek says 'it seemed better to me...', not 'I decided....' Furthermore, the gods are often portrayed as initiating a human action by 'putting into a man' a drive (or an idea), which again suggests that Homeric man was highly aware of the spontaneous element in his psychological experience; and he is very emotional, and distinguishes between his emotional responses in a manner unfamiliar to us. In fact, it might be said that Homeric man experiences himself as a plurality, rather than a unity, with an indistinct boundary."<sup>28</sup>

If Adkins is right, the Homeric self was more like a Deleuzian multiplicity than the unified intentional system characterized by the 'orthodox conception' of agents. He suggests that 'it is not the fragmentation of the Homeric personality, but the development in other cultures of the ego-centred personality, that requires explanation.'<sup>29</sup> Other considerations support the view that the 'orthodox conception' is a historically specific, unique set of beliefs, rather than, as Macdonald and Pettit call it, 'common knowledge'.<sup>30</sup>

The concept of intentional explanation involves a distinction between two kinds of events: (1) those that under some description can be characterized as actions,

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<sup>27</sup> A.W.H. Adkins, *From the Many to the One* (London, 1970), pp.15-16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.267.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44.

<sup>30</sup> G. Macdonald and P.Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London, 1981), p.100.

accounting for which requires the ascription of beliefs and desires to agents and (2) those that are mere physical movements. Weber has some such distinction in mind when he writes: 'we shall speak of "action" in so far as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behaviour.'<sup>31</sup> But this isolating action presupposes drawing a broader distinction between the human and the physical worlds, such that each world operates in a significantly different manner. The human world may be subject to the general laws of nature, but it also involves the existence of intentional behaviour which cannot be explained, at least so far as social science is concerned, solely in terms of these laws.

There is a good case for saying that drawing this kind of distinction between the human and the physical, action and movement is historically quite rare. Jurgen Habermas points to 'the peculiar confusion between nature and culture' characteristic of 'mythical thought': 'What we find most astonishing is the peculiar leveling of the different domains of reality: nature and culture are projected onto the same plane. From this reciprocal assimilation of nature to culture and conversely culture to nature, there results, on the one hand, a nature that is outfitted with anthropomorphic features, drawn into the communicative network of social subjects, and in this sense humanized, and on the other hand a culture that is to a certain extent naturalized and reified and absorbed into the objective nexus of operations of anonymous powers'.<sup>32</sup>

Habermas's account of mythical thought is drawn from the work of anthropologists. There is good reason to believe that forms of 'mythical thought' have been prevalent through much of human history and that sharply distinguishing between the human and the physical is a relatively novel procedure. Such a distinction was implied by what Bernard Williams calls the 'absolute conception of reality' formulated by the founders of modern physics in the seventeenth century.<sup>33</sup> Galileo and Descartes identify the physical world with the realm governed by efficient causes, whose regularities are captured in mechanical laws of nature. The human is sharply separated

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<sup>31</sup> Weber, *Economy*, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, I (London, 1984), pp.47-8.

<sup>33</sup> B.A.D. Williams, *Descartes* (Harmonds Worth, 1978), pp.65-7, 237-49.

from the physical thus conceived and identified with the Cartesian self and its private mental activities, the sphere to which final causes are henceforth banished. The effect is, as it were, to peel thoughts and purposes off from nature, restricting them to the inner world of the subject.<sup>34</sup> The implications of this conceptual revolution are only fully articulated in Kant's critical philosophy, with its clear demarcation between theoretical and practical reason, the theoretical providing the only knowledge we have, of a Newtonian natural world subject to laws of mechanical causality. The practical reason grounds our moral conduct in human freedom whose exercise occurs beyond the chain of physical causes. Weber's account of intentional explanation draws on the use by neo-Kantian philosophers of this distinction to argue that our knowledge of the human world is very different from that of the physical.

Habermas argues that the formulation of the 'absolute conception of reality' is an essential prerequisite for the development of the sort of conception of human agents involved in intentional explanation: 'Only to the extent that the formal concept for an external world develops ... can the complementary concept of the internal world or of subjectivity arise, that is, a world to which the individual has privileged access and to which everything is attributed that cannot be incorporated in the external world.'<sup>35</sup>

Two qualifications must be made to the claim that the 'orthodox conception of agents' is a comparatively recent innovation. First, it would be absurd to suggest that earlier conceptions are absolutely discontinuous with those embodied in the notion of intentional explanation. The influence of Greek thought on analytical philosophy of mind is evident in discussions of Aristotle's views on weakness of will. However, Aristotle's writings on such topics apply a corpus of concepts significantly different from those involved in the 'absolute conception of reality'. The behaviour of all entities, not just human beings, is to be explained teleologically, in terms of the purposes they strive to

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<sup>34</sup> See A.J.P. Kenny, 'Cartesian Privacy', in G. Pitcher, ed., *Wittgenstein* (London, 1970). The Crucial Distinction between Primary and Secondary Qualities is also by Galileo, see S. Drake ed., *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo* (Garden City, 1957), pp.273.

<sup>35</sup> Habermas, *Theory*, p.51.

achieve. All living organisms, plants and animals as well as humans possess a soul. It is not distinct from the body but the principle of its organization. The theoretical context of Aristotle's discussions of the human soul is therefore profoundly different from that surrounding the 'orthodox conception'.

The case of Greek thought is a rather special one. Michel Foucault puts it very well when he writes of 'a practice doubtless constitutive of western philosophy, of interrogating at once the difference which keeps us at a distance from a thought in which we recognize the origins of our own and the proximity that remains despite this separation, which we ceaselessly widen'.

One reason for this proximity is the contribution which Greek thought made to the formation of the 'absolute conception of reality'. This can be seen in at least two ways. First, Plato in particular developed a conception of thought as *theoria*, the disinterested contemplation of being. According to Charles Taylor, both Plato and modern physical science agree in thinking that 'a theoretical understanding aims at a disengaged perspective. We are not trying to understand things merely as they impinge on us, or are relevant to the purposes we are pursuing, but rather grasp them as they are outside the immediate perspective of our goals and desires and activities'.<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, Plato differed from Aristotle's more teleological understanding in regarding mathematics as essential to discovering the inner structure of nature. This view helped to shape Galileo's revolutionary identification of the physical with the quantitative and therefore non-purposive.

The upshot of these considerations is to suggest that the 'orthodox conception of agents' belongs to a historically specific intellectual context, one that involves the combination of an essentially Platonic notion of theoretical understanding with the more modern idea that it is legitimate to interfere in nature in order to know it. To assert, as Macdonald and Pettit do, that this conception is 'indubitable', 'undeniable', or 'common knowledge' is therefore to display one of analytical philosophy's most characteristic

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<sup>36</sup> C. Taylor, 'Rationality', in M. Hollis and S. Lukes eds., *Rationality and Relativism* (Oxford, 1982), p.89. See also, on *theoria*, H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, 1975), pp. 110-11.



blindnesses, namely its lack of any historical self-consciousness, its characteristic failure to recognize the historical distance that often separates theoretical writings and imprint left on them by the distinctive circumstances in which they emerge.<sup>37</sup>

There is, however, a line of defence, open to Macdonald and Pettit. This is to assert that whatever view of the world agents may have, mythical or otherwise, they nevertheless apply the 'orthodox conception of agents' in their daily transactions with one another. One way of making out this claim would be to argue that understanding another person necessarily involves ascribing beliefs and desires to the other. Such an argument might be thought to give the 'orthodox conception' apodictic status if it could be shown to be a case of a transcendental argument. Arguments of this kind<sup>38</sup> take some indisputable feature of our experience, and then seek to show what must be the case if this feature is to exist.<sup>39</sup> In this case understanding would be the indisputable feature and the 'orthodox conception' what must be true for understanding to be possible. Macdonald and Pettit may have some such claim in mind when they call the 'orthodox conception' undeniable' but they do not present it explicitly or argue for it. I shall return to such matters when considering the question of interpretation in chapter 3.

### **Human Nature : The Need for a Philosophical Anthropology**

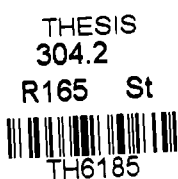
Foucault argues that it is the epistemological inadequacy of the hitherto dominant 'philosophy of subject', the failure of successive attempts to found knowledge and meaning upon the Cartesian self, or its Kantian shadow, the transcendental subject, which give rise to post-war French 'anti-humanism'.<sup>40</sup> From being constitutive, the Subject

<sup>37</sup> For a stimulating discussion of the problems which arise here, See R. Rorty et al, eds., *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge, 1984).

<sup>38</sup> Modelled on Kant's Transcendental Deduction of the Categories in the Critique of Pure Reason.

<sup>39</sup> See C. Taylor, 'The Validity of Transcendental Arguments', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s. LXXXIX, 1978.

<sup>40</sup> M. Foucault and R. Sennett, 'Sexuality and Solitude', in *London Review of Books : Anthology One* (London, 1981), pp.170-1.



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could be shown to be constituted, the effect, in particular, of specific social practices. Althusser's claim that individuals are formed into subjects within ideology was one attempt to make out this thesis.<sup>41</sup> Foucault came to describe his whole project as the attempt 'to create a history of the modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made into subjects'.<sup>42</sup>

*Discipline and Punish* (1975) and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1976) represent one version of Foucault's history of the subject. Here his central concept is that of 'power-knowledge', the relations of domination that articulate discursive and non-discursive practices into a historically specific apparatus, an assemblage of heterogeneous elements.<sup>43</sup> The two examples of such apparatuses are: the disciplines, the practices of surveillance and control which develop in a wide variety of institutions-prisons, schools, asylums, factories-in the nineteenth century. Secondly, sexuality which he conceives as not a biologically given substance but rather a historically specific set of social practices constructed around the belief that the truth about human beings lies in their sex.

One property of these practices is that they constitute subjects. Foucault writes : 'It is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual, that is, is not the vis-a-vis of power; 'it is, I believe, one of its prime effects.'<sup>44</sup> Thus the disciplines form individuals as 'docile bodies' ready to work at the pace and in the manner required of them.

Foucault does not think of the sort of process envisaged by Parsons, where subjects internalize prevailing norms and values. It is their very existence as subjects possessing the capacity so to internalize that is a 'prime effect' of power. At the same

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<sup>41</sup> See. L. Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London, 1971).

<sup>42</sup> M. Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', Afterword to H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault* (Brighton, 1982), p.208.

<sup>43</sup> See M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton, 1980), pp.194-5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98.

time, however, Foucault conceives power as an inherently antagonistic relation: 'power is a war, a war continued by other means'.<sup>45</sup> This leads him to claim that 'where there is power, there is resistance and that however, or rather for the same reason, the latter is never in a position of exteriority with respect to power.'

This view of power gives rise to the following problems : granted that 'power is "always already there", that one is never "outside" it, that there are no "margins" for those who break with the system to gambal in', how is resistance possible ?<sup>46</sup> The problem does not arise in pluralist political science. Here power tends to be conceived thus : 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do'.<sup>47</sup> Power is here a relationship between agents with their own wants. Some of which at least were formed outside this relationship. But Foucault conceives subjects as themselves among 'the prime effects of power'. Therefore he cannot appeal to their recalcitrant wants to explain resistance.

In the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* Foucault speaks of 'the body and its pleasures' as the basis for a 'counter-attack' against the 'apparatus of sexuality'. But this seems more an act of desperation than a solution to the problem of resistance. It posits a natural man repressed by social relations. The aporia of power and resistance may help to explain the major shift in Foucault's thought. The extent of the shift is indicated by the following remark : 'Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only in so far as they are free!<sup>48</sup> The distance between 'docile bodies' and 'free subjects' appears vast.

More concretely, Foucault introduces the notion of a form of power-relation other than the 'techniques of domination' he had studied in *Discipline and Punish*, namely what

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<sup>45</sup> M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p.90.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.141. On the problems of resistance, see N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London, 1978), pp.146-53 and P. Dews, 'Foucault', *Economy and Society*, 8:2 (1979).

<sup>47</sup> R.A. Dahl, 'The Concept of Power; in R.Bell et al. eds, *Political Power* (New York, 1969), p.80.

<sup>48</sup> Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, p.221.

he called 'technologies of the self'.<sup>49</sup> 'By that it is necessary to understand the reflective and voluntary practices by which men, not only fix the rules of their conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to modify themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life a work which bears certain aesthetic values and obeys certain stylistic criteria.'<sup>50</sup>

The main example of such an 'aesthetic of existence' is that of the 'government of pleasures' practised by free male citizens in classical antiquity. The techniques through which they so regulate their behaviour as to fit them to play their part in both household and city.

Now what is striking about these descriptions of 'technologies of the self' is that they seem to accord to subjects an active role in their own making. This is suggested by such formulations as 'reflective and voluntary practices', 'men...seek to transform themselves, to modify themselves'. Foucault says, power is 'basically... a question of government', where 'to govern... is to structure the possible field of action of others'.<sup>51</sup> But what are to make of power-relations which involve structuring our own 'possible field of action'? Foucault says nothing about the sort of personal motives or social mechanisms which might lead to the development of 'technologies of the self'. Given his earlier preoccupation with power-knowledge he says little about the relation between the 'government of pleasures' and the public world of the ancient polis.<sup>52</sup>

What makes Foucault so intriguing and challenging a thinker is his belief that what we think of as enduring and fundamental aspects of existence are nothing but historical constructs formed by a specific regime of social practices. Behind this lies a thoroughgoing nominalism, which treats all substances as contingent unities, temporary

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<sup>49</sup> Foucault and Sennett, 'Sexuality', pp.171-2.

<sup>50</sup> Foucault, *Usage*, pp.16-17.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p.221.

<sup>52</sup> G.E.R. Lloyd, 'The Mind on Sex', *New York Review of Books* (13 March 1986).

resting-points in the endless play of difference.<sup>53</sup> The difficulties in which Foucault finds himself around the question of resistance and his subsequent development of the concept of 'technologies of the self' show one respect in which this nominalism is untenable (there are others, but it is unnecessary to consider them here).

Put simply, it does not seem that Foucault can, even in his own terms do without some account of the properties that all subjects share. Such an account seems to be required by the notion of an 'aesthetic of existence' which is a practice of self-government. That is, there are some aspects of human subjects which are not simply socially constructed and which may provide both motives for and means of acting. In other words, even Foucauldian genealogy requires the concept of an enduring human nature.

Those who never doubted the necessity of such a concept will not find this conclusion very striking. It is a tribute to both the rhetorical skills of the proponents of Parisian anti-humanism and the genuine insights which they offered, that the following remark by Ian Hacking does not seem merely to celebrate an absurdity: 'Foucault was that rare nominalist apprised of the ... evident fact that, if there is no intrinsic human nature, there is no salvation, period.'<sup>54</sup> No intrinsic human nature? Are there really no properties which human beings share? Or the thought is that these properties are irrelevant to any understanding of human history. But is it really plausible to say that if human beings photosynthesized (to take an admirable example of Stephen Jay Gould's) this would make no difference to their history?<sup>55</sup>

I speak here of the concept of an enduring human nature rather than of the orthodox conception of agents. There is a close relationship between the two notions, which will be further explored below. But the orthodox conception, while its truth may require the existence of a common human nature, does not itself make reference to

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<sup>53</sup> See M. Foucault, 'Questions of Method', *Ideology and Consciousness*, 8 (1981) and Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Foucault*.

<sup>54</sup> I. Hacking, review of Dreyfus and Rabinow, Foucault, (2nd ed.), *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXII, 5(1985), p.277.

<sup>55</sup> S.J.Gould, *Ever since Darwin* (Harmondsworth, 1980), pp.252-3.

specifically human needs and capacities in stating what it is to be an agent. This partly reflects the circumstances of its formulation. Thus Dennett's definition of personhood<sup>56</sup> is to some degree at least a response to developments in artificial intelligence and is formulated so that a computer could, at least in principle, meet these conditions. Whatever its virtues, it abstracts from one central fact about human beings, namely that they are embodied agents, whose intentional activities flow from the capacities they possess and are intelligible in the light of the needs they share as members of the same natural species. Conceiving the subject as a disembodied self is also central to the philosophical tradition from Descartes to Kant.

The Orthodox Conception is therefore best seen as part of a broader account of human nature, one which, as Norman Geras puts it, treats human beings as, 'like all other species, material and natural beings, "irredeemably" rooted in a given biological constitution, absolutely continuous with the rest of the natural world'.<sup>57</sup> The discontinuity implied in the use of intentional explanations<sup>58</sup> is to be seen as a consequence of this 'given biological constitution' rather than as marking an unbridgeable Chasm separating the human and the natural. Such a perspective is also reflected in David Wiggins's definition of a person as 'any animal the physical make up of whose species constitutes the species' typical members thinking intelligent beings, with reason

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<sup>56</sup> Daniel Dennett specifies six necessary conditions of 'personhood': persons are rational beings; persons are beings to which ... intentional predicates [i.e. beliefs and desires], are ascribed; whether something counts as a person depends in some way on an attitude taken toward it, a stance adopted with respect to it; the object towards which this personal stance is taken must be capable of reciprocating in some way; persons must be capable of verbal communication; [persons are] conscious in some special way [namely they are aware of having engaged in actions and therefore can be held responsible for them: D.Dennett, *Brainstorms* (Brighton, 1981), 269-71, 281-5.

<sup>57</sup> N. Geras, *Marx and Human Nature* (London, 1983), p.97.

<sup>58</sup> Ascribing beliefs and desires to human agents on the assumption of their rationality.

and reflection, and typically enables them to consider themselves, the same thinking things, in different times and places.<sup>59</sup>

Mary Midgley suggests that we conceive of the 'nature of a species' as 'a certain range of powers and tendencies, a repertoire, inherited and forming a fairly firm characteristic pattern'. Geras suggests that we distinguish 'human nature', 'a constant entity, the set of all (relatively) permanent human characteristics', and the 'nature of man', 'the all-round character of human beings in some given context. Whilst the first usage makes of human nature something unchanging by definition, the second leaves open the degree of mutability in the nature of man'.<sup>60</sup> Such a distinction removes a traditional Marxist objection to the notion of human nature. That is, forms of behaviour arising within specific social relations are treated as 'permanent human characteristics'. Geras's usage allows us to regard these as aspects rather of the 'nature of man'.

In the first place, 'permanent characteristics' constituting human nature include not just the 'range of powers and tendencies' but also certain distinctive needs. This point needs to be stressed in the light of the way in which subjectivity is often conceived as something ethereal, non-bodily, even by those committed to understanding human beings as historically situated agents. Thus Agnes Heller rightly objects to Habermas's theory of communicative action because 'the creature like aspects of human beings are missing... Habermasian man... has no body, no feelings; the "structure of personality" is identified with cognition, language and interaction.'<sup>61</sup> Important though the questions of the body and of human needs are for an account of agency, I shall however, not deal with them here.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> D. Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, 1980), p.188.

<sup>60</sup> Geras, *Marx*, p.24.

<sup>61</sup> A. Heller, 'Habermas and Marxism', in J.B. Thompson and D. Held eds., *Habermas: Critical Debates* (London, 1982), pp.21, 22.

<sup>62</sup> See M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, 1962); A. Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London, 1976); B.S. Turner, *The Body and Society* (Oxford, 1984); and R. Scruton, *Sexual Desire* (London, 1986).

Human nature consists in capacities as well as needs. An account of these capacities is central to Marx's philosophical anthropology.<sup>63</sup> Elster summarizes this theory of human nature thus: 'Marx distinguishes men from other animals on the basis of (i) self-consciousness, (ii) intentionality, (iii) language, (iv) tool-using, (v) tool-making and (vi) co-operation.'<sup>64</sup> Marx in fact varies his stress on these different features. Thus he writes in the Manuscripts: 'The animal is immediately one with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life-activity. Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life-activity ...conscious life-activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life-activity'.<sup>65</sup>

Central to Marx's account of human labour is its redirective Character. The fact that human beings' ability consciously to reflect on their activity allows them to modify and improve on prevailing productive techniques. Rather than being tied to the fixed repertoire of behaviour characteristic of other species, human productive activity is distinguished by its flexibility, by the indefinite variety of ways in which human beings may meet their needs by virtue of their cognitive capacities.<sup>66</sup> Marx's conception of human labour as necessarily a social activity is closely related to his view of language as 'the immediate actuality of thought' : 'Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it exist for me.'<sup>67</sup> In a polemic against the 'Robinsonades' of Rousseau and Smith, Marx makes the connection between the social character of language and that of labour explicit: 'Production by an isolated individual outside society... is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and

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<sup>63</sup> Developed Chiefly in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 and *The German Ideology*.

<sup>64</sup> J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, 1985), p.62.

<sup>65</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *CW*. III. p.276.

<sup>66</sup> See, S. Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (London, 1936), pp.272-307; and A. Wood, *Karl Marx* (London, 1981), p.32.

<sup>67</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *CW* V, pp.446, 44.



talking to each other.<sup>68</sup> Thus, Marx's philosophical anthropology ascribes to human beings reciprocity, the capacity to engage in verbal communication and self-consciousness.

### Practical Reason and Social Structures

The upshot of the arguments so far is to embed the orthodox conception of agents in a broader theory of human nature. As David Wiggins puts it, 'the constitution that is seen in its causal relations with the contingencies of human history and geography is a constitution supervenient on contingencies of human biological constitution.'<sup>69</sup> The approach developed here can be seen as naturalistic, in the sense of treating both the boundaries between human beings and the physical world and those between philosophy and the sciences as relative. The sort of view of human nature developed here will impose constraints on our explanations of social events. It can be made to issue in an ethical theory. (However, this theory is not 'ethical naturalism' of the sort condemned by G. E. Moore. Here the referents of terms such as 'good' are thought to be ultimately physical properties. It does, however, seem to involve commitment to some form of moral realism. That is, to the claim that moral judgements are true or false and not merely expressions of desire or imperatives. This approach seems broadly consonant with the neo-Aristotelian drift of much contemporary moral philosophy).<sup>70</sup>

This conception of human nature and the account of agency it implies has nothing to do with the 'philosophy of subject' which lead Foucault, Althusser and others to embrace anti-humanism. To view human beings as animals of a certain

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<sup>68</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.84. see also V.N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York, 1973).

<sup>69</sup> Wiggins, *Sameness*, p.185.

<sup>70</sup> See, in addition to MacIntyre's writings, I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London, 1970); D. Wiggins, *Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford, 1976); S. Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Oxford, 1983); and B.A.O. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, 1985).

kind capable of engaging in a range of intentional activities is in no sense to endorse an epistemology in which the subject is the foundation of knowledge or the source of meaning. But it is still to conceive human beings as centres capable of initiating action, rather than as bundles of drives and desires constructed within social relations. It is important to distinguish the view of human nature from the 'philosophy of subject' which is central to western philosophy from Descartes through Kant to Husserl. The thesis prefers to speak of 'agents' rather than of 'subjects'. The connotation this term has of the operation of causal powers in the physical as well as the human world. But this is not meant to suggest that the explanation of human behaviour does not involve the use of those distinctive principles embodied in the orthodox conception of agents.

The question is whether or not the orthodox conception woven into an account of human nature requires methodological individualism (MI).<sup>71</sup> Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit argue that the orthodox conception does involve MI. Since to accord 'explanatory autonomy' to social structures<sup>72</sup> is to suggest that at least some social events are not 'the rational outcome of the agents' beliefs and desires', and is thus to contradict the 'indubitable' orthodox conception.

The form of action-explanation can be cast into an inference.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The claim that the explanation of social events can only be in terms of individuals, their states and properties. There is, however, no unitary view that can be identified as methodological individualism. Rajeev Bhargava 'distinguishes different strands within MI, an ontological, a semantic, and an explanatory'. He also 'distinguishes five different variants of explanatory individualism'. For him, 'the most plausible version of MI is explanatory individualism (called intentionalism). It 'seeks a non-nomological explanation of social facts in terms of the individually individuated intentional states of individuals'. See Rajeev Bhargava, *Individualism in Social Science: Forms and Limits of a Methodology* (1992, Clarendon Press, Oxford).

<sup>72</sup> That is, to refuse to reduce them to the consequences, intended or otherwise, of individual action.

<sup>73</sup> The structure of action-explanations derives from what Aristotle calls the 'practical syllogism'. (See. J. Raz. ed., *Practical Reasoning* (Oxford, 1978).

- 1) A desires that p
- 2) A believes that q, namely that doing x will bring it about that p
- 3) Therefore A does x.

There are various ways in which such a piece of practical reasoning may be defeasible. For example, there is the case of what Aristotle called *akrasia* or incontinence. Here A desires that p and believes that q, but nevertheless does y rather than x out of weakness of will.<sup>74</sup> There is another way in which the inference from (1) and (2) to (3) may be defeated. It may be that A cannot do x because he is prevented from doing it or because doing it is beyond his powers.

In this case A embarks on X, but is prevented from accomplishing it. So here we have, instead of (3)<sup>75</sup>

(3') A tries to do X. <sup>83</sup>

For the conclusion of an action-explanation to be validly inferred, i.e. for (3) to follow from (1) and (2), we require also

- (4) A has the power to do x, and is not prevented from doing it.

Usually (4) is just treated as part of the general assumption that other things are equal along with assumptions e.g. that A has no stronger or equally powerful conflicting desires. But to do so is to consign to the *ceteris paribus* clause features of A's social context that are crucial both to whether he can perform the action he believes will realize his desires and to what the actual outcome will be. Actions consist in the exercise of powers and the powers agents have depend on and are determined in part by social structures. That is the nub of my argument against MI, developed at much greater length in the following chapter. Rajeev Bhargava observes, 'the more seasoned views on methodology in the social sciences see that neither the individual nor the social can be given absolute explanatory priority at all levels. Despite all the strident rhetoric, the

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<sup>74</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, vii, pp.1-10.

<sup>75</sup> G.H. Von Wright, 'On so-called Practical Inference', in Raz ed., *Practical Reasoning*, p.56.

abstract individual continues to be the hidden premiss of MI.... the literature on the subject has not probed one of its own principal assumptions deeply enough.<sup>76</sup>

It is argued that the emergent social properties and relationships are themselves the consequences of individual actions but the point is that these actions themselves involve the exercise of powers determined at least in part by the social relations prevailing at the time they are performed. However far one pushes back to story, action-explanation will still involve both individuals' beliefs and desires and the structures on which their powers partly depend.

To conclude, the explanatory autonomy of social structures is not inconsistent with the orthodox conception of agents, since action-explanations involve a hidden premiss (4), ascribing to agents the power to perform the action explained. To establish a formal consistency is, however, not enough. The case made out for methodological individualism turns on the supposed inadequacies of non-individualist versions of theory of history.

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<sup>76</sup> Rajeev Bhargava, *Individualism*, pp.11, 13.

## CHAPTER II

# STRUCTURE AND ACTION

### **The Logical Status of Social Structure**

Why think of societies in terms of the structures they possess? Various considerations might lead one in this direction. First, there is what Anthony Giddens describes as 'the degree of inter-dependence of action, or "systemness"' that societies evidently display.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, societies persist in time. Thirdly, it is a characteristic of social relations that their nature and existence do not depend on the identity of the particular agents involved in them. Social relations are sets of empty places.<sup>2</sup> Fourthly, social relations often involve regularities which occur with the agents involved in them not understanding or even necessarily even being aware of them. In this respect social life involves processes which go on, as Hegel put it, behind the backs of human agents. Finally, to say that a society has a structure is to say that there are limits to the extent to which it may vary without becoming an instance of a different kind of society.

Rather than offer a formal definition of social structure, the thesis tries to indicate some of the issues addressed by explanations that mention entities falling under this concept. A good place to start is the distinction drawn by David Lockwood between 'social integration' and 'system integration'. The concept of 'social integration' is central to the 'normative functionalism' of Talcott Parsons and his followers. The approach is characterized by the emphatic role attributed to "common value elements" in the integration of social action and the unwarranted assumption that the study of social stability must precede the analysis of social change. Parsons' critics like Ralf Dahrendorf and John Rex emphasize instead the existence of conflicting interests and values. They highlight the problem of social change. It is explained as 'a result of the shifting balance of power between conflict groups': 'Now while social change is very frequently associated with conflict, the reverse does not necessarily hold. Conflict may be endemic

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<sup>1</sup> A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London, 1979), p.76.

<sup>2</sup> See E.O. Wright, *Class Structure and Income Determination* (New York, 1979).

and intense in a social system without causing any basic structural change. Why does some conflict result in change while other conflict does not?'<sup>3</sup>

Conflict theorists such as Dahrendorf and Rex have no answer to this question. This is a limitation which reflects their sharing with Parsons problematic of social integration. Overcoming this weakness requires formulation of the concept of system integration: 'whereas the problem of social integration focuses attention upon the orderly or conflictual relationships between the actors, the problem of system integration focuses on the orderly or conflictual relationship between the parts of a social system'. Lockwood uses Marx to illustrate the concept: 'one might almost say that the "conflict" which in Marxian theory is decisive for change is not the power conflict arising through the relationships in the productive system, but the system conflict arising from "contradictions" between "property institutions" and the "forces of production"'.<sup>4</sup>

Giddens suggests that we should further distinguish between social system and structure. He conceives structure as 'an absent set of differences, temporally "present" only in their instantiation, in the constituting moments of social systems.'

Social systems involve regularized relations of interdependence between individuals or groups, that typically can be best analysed as recurrent social practices. Social systems are systems of social interaction... Systems, in this terminology, have structures, or, more accurately, have structural properties. Structures are necessarily (logically) properties of systems or collectivities, and are characterized by the 'absence of a subject'.<sup>5</sup>

Underlying this distinction is the thought that the role of the concept of social structure is to explain 'the binding of time and space in social systems'.<sup>6</sup> One way of putting it is that structure and system are respectively the explanans and the explanandum

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<sup>3</sup> D. Lockwood, 'Social Integration and System Integration', in G.K. Zollschan and W. Hirsch eds., *Explorations in Social Change* (Boston, 1964), pp.245, 249.

<sup>4</sup> D.Lockwood, 'Social Integration and system Integration', pp.245, 249-250.

<sup>5</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems*, pp.64, 65-6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

of social theory. How do human actions involve persisting (and changing) patterns of social interaction? The concept of structure should be seen as helping us to answer that question.

Better than abstract reflection on this concept, however, is consideration of attempts to formulate concrete accounts of social structures. Historical materialism offers one such account. I shall consider two apparently very different statements of the relationship between structure and action within this tradition. They are: G.A.Cohen's 'orthodox historical materialism' and the 'rational-choice' Marxism of Jon Elster and others, before setting out a more adequate account of the relationship.

### **Structure as an Explanatory Notion**

In social science, the term 'structure' appears in two main bodies of literature: (a) functionalism which is often in contemporary versions called structural-functionalism; and (b) structuralism.

In functionalism, 'structure' is understood as referring to a 'pattern' of social relationships; function, to how such patterns actually operate as systems. Structure here is primarily a descriptive term, the main burden of explanation being carried by function. This is why the literature of structural-functionalism has been overwhelmingly concerned with the concept of function, barely treating the notion of structure at all.

In structuralism, by contrast, 'structure' appears in a more explanatory role, as linked to the notion of transformations. Structural analysis, whether applied to language, to myth, literature or art, or more generally to social relationships, is considered to penetrate below the level of surface appearances. In other words, by the use of structure as an explanatory notion, one refers to underlying generative mechanisms which give rise to certain observable manifestations.

The structuralist writers like Levi-Strauss, are concerned to discover the abstract principles of order and organisation that govern social life. They admit the existence of structures as distinct from the system of observable relations and interactions. Structures 'emanate from the intellect', from the human mind as ever the same; this is why they are prior to, rather than, as Durkheim would have it, derivative from the social order; prior

to the 'mental' as well and, a fortiori, to the 'organic'.

Thus the definition veers away from the idea that structure denotes a 'framework of actually existing relations' which are amenable to us through 'direct observation'.<sup>7</sup>

Levi-Strauss accuses Radcliffe-Brown of an 'ignorance of hidden realities' in believing 'that structure is of the order of empirical observation when in fact it is beyond it'; and concludes that in 'seeing it where it is not, he deprives the notion of its full force and significance'.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, he rejects Radcliffe-Brown's conception of social structure which is naturalistic, empiricist and allied to a particular type of comparative method.

The fundamental principle of Levi-Strauss's structuralism is that 'all social life, however elementary, presupposes an intellectual activity in man of which the formal properties cannot, accordingly, be a reflection of the concrete organization of society'.<sup>9</sup>

For Levi-Strauss, the term 'structure' is used both for the representation and the reality it describes. It refers not to the observed material of social relations but to the unconscious and hidden reality which is the 'real' social structure. This is reached by progressively disclosing the elements which are articulated in a formal 'structure', rather than by abstraction from the facts. So the representation is a description of the structure of the society and an explanation of how it works.

Structures in this sense are ultimately logico-mathematical models of the observed social relations. They are neither genetic nor historical but deductive. As a result, man cannot create social structure, nor change history and he must always be mystified by his own understanding of society. Hence the productive nature of man is ignored. It is replaced with an unchanging homo sapiens. In fact, if an ultimately determinant factor is to be isolated in Levi-Strauss's work, this factor is not of a social character at all, but is rather the 'objective structure of the psyche and brain': culture must in the last resort be reducible to nature.

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<sup>7</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London & Henley, 1952), p.190.

<sup>8</sup> Levi-Strauss, *The Scope of Anthropology* (London, 1967), p.117.

<sup>9</sup> Levi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Boston, 1969), p.96.



This thesis is premised on the centrality of conscious human agency who is able to discover the laws of history and society, which may then be acted upon by political action. *Therefore, my usage of structure has nothing to do with innate structures of the brain* (Levi-Strauss, Chomsky, Piaget).

Instead, I shall be dealing with structures (forces and relations of production) which can be said to generate social interaction. They are the most basic structural features of social formations. Marx's forces/relations of production scheme may be read as asserting the universal primacy of allocation over authorisation, both in the constitution of society and in the dynamics of social change. These structures represent the conditions of interaction. These 'conditions' are to be understood in an explanatory sense rather than a simply descriptive one in that they are necessarily involved in a causal account of action.

Similarly, the distinction between system and structure, as in the work of Giddens,<sup>10</sup> where system refers to the reproduced social relations and structure refers to 'generative rules and resources', is both unnecessary and misleading. I argue that there are no advantages to be gained from treating 'social relations' as separable from the rules, resources and the wider structures of power and domination that underpin and legitimate them. Conversely, to treat rules, resources, power, domination, etc. as existing independently of actual social relations, is also a false separation. More concretely and specifically, from the point of view of a theory of action the notion of a preconstituted structure must have an institutional referent, thus effecting a connection between institutional context and the interaction which takes place within it. By 'institution' is not meant to imply some set of normative as against material or infrastructural elements, rather it is meant to evoke the fact that which always have some existential referent. I wish to underline the fact that if structures (as I use the term) are to be seen as mechanisms which in some sense generate interaction, then they cannot be understood as disembodied principles of social organisation.

Although I do not wish to enter into a complex (but potentially sterile) debate about which is the 'correct' usage of structure but my feeling is that the 'correct' usage

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<sup>10</sup> See Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London, 1979).

will vary according to the kind of problem in which the user is currently embroiled. The way in which I am using the term would be to say that structures are the socially structured, and sometimes preconstituted, conditions of action where 'conditions' are to be understood as generative rather than simply descriptive, mediating elements of the environment of human action.

### **The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism**

Historical materialism can be seen as making a distinctive claim about the kinds of structures which have primacy in explaining social systems. These are the forces and relations of production. But before considering these concepts, it is to be noted that Marxism can also be taken as distinguishing between two kinds of social system as well. These are modes of production and social formations. Etienne Balibar writes: 'Capital, which expounds the abstract theory of the capitalist mode of production, does not undertake to analyse concrete social formations which generally contain several different modes of production, whose laws of co-existence and hierarchy must therefore be studied.'<sup>11</sup>

This distinction should not be conflated with that between economic base and ideologico-political superstructure. To quote Nicos Poulantzas, 'a mode of production, as Engels stated schematically, is composed of different levels or instances, the economic, political, ideological, and theoretical.'<sup>12</sup> The difference between mode of production and social formation is rather one between different levels of abstraction. The mode of production refers to certain basic combinations of forces and relations of production along with the other structures which may be inferred from each such combination. While a social formation typically 'presents a particular combination, a specific overlapping of several "pure" modes of production'.<sup>13</sup> The distinction is not made explicitly by Marx, Lenin or any of the other classical figures. It is made by

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<sup>11</sup> L. Althusser and E. Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London, 1970), p.207, note 5.

<sup>12</sup> N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London, 1973), p.13.

<sup>13</sup> N. Poulantzas, *Political Power*, p.15. As Lenin demonstrated in the Development of Capitalism in Russia.

Althusser and his followers. However, the concept of social formation can be put to good use in historical writing.<sup>14</sup>

The fundamental concept of historical materialism is mode of production. To specify the character of a mode of production is to give an account of the specific combination of the forces and relations of production it involves. There has been much discussion of these concepts as a result of the attempts by Althusser and by Cohen to reconstruct a coherent theory of historical materialism from Marx's own evolving and often inconsistent usage.

Because of Marx's own inconsistencies and ambiguities, much turns on which parts of his writings one chooses to focus on. Thus Cohen takes 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as the bench-mark of his interpretation. Cohen assigns hierarchical structure to a mode of production: at the top the ideologico-political superstructure, then the 'economic structure' on which it rests, the relations of production and finally the productive forces whose development provides history with its dynamic.<sup>15</sup>

Cohen thinks of production forces as a list of elements contributing to production: 'To qualify as a productive force, a facility must be capable of use by a producing agent in such a way that production occurs (partly) as a result of its use, and it is someone's purpose that the facility so contribute to production. Though Cohen's discussion of the constituents of the productive forces is subtle and illuminating, but his primary concern

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<sup>14</sup> See P. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), p.39. This is not to say that the notion of the social formation as an 'articulation' of modes of production cannot, and has not been abused. Althusserians have tended to neglect a peculiar property of the capitalist mode of production, its tendency to establish a world system of which individual social formations are component parts, and which is subject to processes of uneven and combined development: see L. Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin* (New York, 1970). Failure to recognize adequately this dimension of the capitalist mode has led often to an underestimation of its dominance within particular national economies. See A.Foster-Carter, 'The Modes of Production Controversy', *New Left Review*, 107, (1978).

<sup>15</sup> G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History - A Defence* (Oxford, 1978), pp.28-9. (This text will be referred to hereafter as KMTH).

is with their development. He argues that 'the development of the productive forces may be identified with the growth in the surplus they make possible, and this in turn may be identified with the amount of the day that remains after the labouring time required to maintain the producers has been subtracted'.<sup>16</sup>

This approach does not, however, capture an important feature of Marx's own usage: Goran Therborn points out that the concept of productive forces originates as Marx's translation of 'productive powers' in the writings of Smith, Ricardo and other classical economists. Marx refers to the productive forces as 'the methods of labour and thereby its social productivity'. What he means by 'methods of labour' is made clear in chapter 7 of *Capital* volume 1, where the capitalist process of production is conceived as a combination of the 'labour process' and the 'process of valorisation'. The valorization process consists of the extraction of surplus-value, the mode of exploitation specific to capitalism. By contrast, 'the labour-process is purposeful activity aimed at production of use-values. It is an appropriation of what exists in nature for the requirements of man. It is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the nature-imposed condition of human existence, or rather it is common to all forms of society in which human beings live'.

The labour process consists of three elements: '(1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work'. (2) and (3) - raw materials and instruments of labour respectively - reduce to one category, the means of production, counterposed to labour-power, the capacity to work embodied in human beings.<sup>17</sup>

Cohen also treats the productive forces as consisting primarily in the means of production and labour-power.<sup>18</sup> However, viewing them as a labour-process combining these elements introduces an additional, very important nuance, suggested by Balibar when he argues that the productive forces should not be thought of as 'a list'. Rather

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<sup>16</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, pp.32, 61.

<sup>17</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, I (Harmondsworth, 1976), p.290.

<sup>18</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, p.32.

they, 'too, are a connexion of a certain type within the mode of production, in other words, they, too, are a relation of production'.<sup>19</sup> One sense in which this is so arises simply as a consequence of the fact that labour is a social activity. Co-operation is a necessary feature of the labour-process as the 'nature-imposed condition of human existence'. Thus Marx endorses the view that 'hunting was the first form of co-operation'.<sup>20</sup>

Cohen distinguishes between 'material and social relations of production', where 'a description is social if and only if it entails an ascription to persons... of rights and powers vis-a- vis other men'. However, he excludes 'material relations of production' from the productive forces. It reflects Cohen's insistence that 'the familiar distinction between forces of production and relations of production is, in Marx, one of a set of contrasts between nature and society'.<sup>21</sup> It does not sit well with Marx's claim in *The German Ideology* that the 'mode of co- operation is itself a "productive force"'.<sup>22</sup>

Marx argues that: 'It is not only what is made but how, and by what instruments of labour, that distinguishes different economic epochs. Instruments of labour not only supply a standard of the degree of development that human labour has attained, but they also indicate the social relations within which men work'.<sup>23</sup>

Althusser suggests the following interpretation of this passage: 'one of the three constitutive elements of the labour-process... is therefore dominant: the means of labour.... The 'means of labour' determine the typical form of the labour-process considered: by establishing the 'mode of attack' on external nature subject to transformation in economic production, they determine the mode of production, the basic category of analysis (in economics and history); at the same time, they establish the level

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<sup>19</sup> Althusser and Balibar, *Reading*, p.235.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, p.452, note 20.

<sup>21</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, pp.92-3, 94, 113-14, 98. See also *ibid.*, p.107.

<sup>22</sup> K.Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, V (London, 1975), p.43. (*Collected Works* will be referred to hereafter as CW).

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, p.286.

of productivity of productive labour'.<sup>24</sup>

Althusser's gloss requires two qualifications. First, his ascription of dominance to the instruments (or means) of labour to some degree reflects his anti-humanist predilections. Instruments of a certain kind require labour-power possessing specific skills to operate them. Furthermore, the construction of such instruments requires particular sorts of knowledge. Cohen rightly includes the 'productively relevant parts' of science within the productive forces.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, it remains to be seen in what sense the instruments of labour 'determine the mode of production'. Marx does not distinguish 'different economic epochs' according to the instruments of labour they involve. Modes of production such as slavery, feudalism and capitalism differ according to their relations of production. Nevertheless, Althusser's basic point is right. The labour-process is a particular technical organization of production. It combines certain kinds of means of production and labour-power and as a consequence achieves a certain level of productivity.

The relations of production also involve a specific combination of labour-power and means of production. While discussing the purchase of both these constituents of the labour-process by capital, Marx argues that behind this transaction 'lies... distribution; not distribution in the ordinary meaning of a distribution of articles of consumption, but the distribution of the elements of production itself, the material factors of which are concentrated on one side, and labour-power, isolated, on the other'. As Marx shows in his discussion of 'primitive accumulation' in Part Eight of *Capital* volume I, the separation of labour-power from the means of production is a social condition arising from a historical process, the expropriation of the peasantry. Here he makes the same point, but as a general claim about the relations of production: 'whatever the social form of production, labourers and means of production always remain factors of it. But in a state of separation from each other either of these factors can be such only potentially. For production to go on they must unite. The specific manner in which this union is

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<sup>24</sup> Althusser and Balibar, *Reading*, p.173.

<sup>25</sup> G. A. Cohen, *KMTH*, pp.45-7. Compare K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp.699.

accomplished distinguishes the different economic epochs of the structure of society from one another.'<sup>26</sup>

One may put it like this. The labour-process involves a particular way of combining labour-power and means of production in order to produce use-values. But whether this combination actually occurs depends on the historically specific social relations determining the distribution of the means of production among members of society. Marx is quite emphatic about the importance of this kind of distribution: 'before distribution can be the distribution of products, it is : (1) the distribution of the instruments of production, and (2), which is a further specification of the same relation, the distribution of the members of the society among the different kinds of production. (Subsumption of the individuals under specific relations of production.) The distribution of products is only a result of this distribution, which is comprised within the process of production itself and determines the structure of production.'<sup>27</sup>

The relations of production are constituted by this distribution of the means of production. It determines who controls not simply the means themselves, but also labour-power itself.<sup>28</sup> By 'production relations' Cohen means 'Either relations of ownership by persons of productive forces or persons OR relations presupposing such relations. By ownership is meant not a legal relationship but one of effective control'.<sup>29</sup>

The relations of production involve ownership in the sense of effective control, or, as Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst put it, 'effective possession', cannot be stressed strongly enough.<sup>30</sup> One of Marx's main criticisms of Proudhon was that he conflated production relations with the 'metaphysical or juridical fiction' of legal property forms.

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<sup>26</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, II (Moscow, 1967), pp.33, 36-7.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p.96.

<sup>28</sup> This is partly what is meant by Marx's treating as a consequence of the distribution of the means of production the 'subsumption of the individuals under specific relations of production'.

<sup>29</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, pp.34-5.

<sup>30</sup> B.Hindess and P.Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of production* (London, 1975), ch.5.

He endorses the political realism of such thinkers as Machiavelli, Boudin and Hobbes who 'regard might as the basis of right... If power is taken as the basis of right, then right, law, etc., are merely the symptom, the expression of other relations upon which state power rests'.<sup>31</sup> Failure to observe Marx's distinction between production relations and juridical property forms lead many of his followers into enormous confusion. This is as a result of their tendency to identify socialist relations of production with state ownership of the means of production.

Robert Brenner does not make this identification. He uses the expression 'property relations' to refer to what Marx calls the relations of production: 'By property relations, I mean the relationships among the direct producers, among the class of exploiters (if any exists), and between the exploiters and producers, which specify and determine the regular and systematic access of the individual economic actors (or families) to the means of production and to the economic product'.

Brenner denies that these are, 'in any useful sense, understandable as relations of production per se'. His reason is that Marx in *The German Ideology* conceives the relations of production as both 'socio-technical relations within the unit of production' and property relations determining 'the distribution of the social product among the social classes.' The result is a form of technological determinism in which the development of the division of labour is treated as the motor of historical change.<sup>32</sup>

The *German Ideology* involves a persistent confusion of technical and social relations particularly but not solely in its treatment of the division of labour. However Marx does not use the concept of the relations of production in this work. Rather, 'the concept that accompanies the forces of production is *verkehr* or *verkehrsform*, a much broader term meaning approximately communication, commerce or intercourse.' The concept of the relations of production only 'emerges in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in close relation with the concept of property, to denote a specific totality of economic

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<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx and F. Engels, *CW*, XXXVIII, p.99. See S. Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford, 1985), p.28.

<sup>32</sup> R. Brenner, 'The Social Basis of Economic Development', in J. Roemer ed., *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge, 1986), pp.26, 46, 43, 40-8.



relationships'.<sup>33</sup> Far from perpetuating The German Ideology's conflation of social and technical relations, this concept allows Marx to distinguish sharply between them. For example, in his discussion of the labour-process and the valorization-process in *Capital* volume I.

So identifying the relations of production primarily with the mode of effective control over the means of production has been challenged by Chris Harman: 'It seems to me to limit the notion of the "social relations of production" far too much. Much of the power of Marx's account of history lies in the way in which it shows how small changes in the forces of production lead to small cumulative changes in the social relations arising directly at the point of production, until they challenge the wider relations of society. These small changes might involve new property relations, but in many, many important cases do not'.<sup>34</sup>

Harman agrees with Cohen in interpreting the productive forces narrowly but then defends a conception of production relations wide enough to include the labour-process. This gives rise to the following dilemma: either changes in the productive forces arise from changes in production relations. This view is rejected by Harman since he is committed to treating the productive forces as the dynamic element in the historical process, or the organization of work changes in response to the development of the productive forces. This is a pretty extreme form of technological determinism. His very broad conception of production relations has the effect that social contradictions occur solely between different social relations. Thus 'small changes in the forces of production lead to small cumulative changes in the social relations ... of production, until they challenge the wider relations of production'. Harman identifies this conflict with that between base and superstructure: 'The distinction between base and superstructure is a distinction between social relations which are subject to immediate changes with changes

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<sup>33</sup> G. Therborn, *Science, Class and Society* (London, 1976), pp.368, 371, and see generally 365-75.

<sup>34</sup> C. Harman, 'Base and Superstructure', *International Socialism*, 2: 32 (1986), p.21.

in the productive forces, and those which are relatively static and resistant to change'.<sup>35</sup> So production relations are the aspect of social relations which are most responsive to changes in the productive forces.

Cohen distinguishes between four main modes of production on the basis of their ownership structures.

### OWNERSHIP STRUCTURES

Direct producer	His labour-power	The means of production he uses
Slave	None	None
Serf	Some	Some
Proletarian	All	None
Independent producer	All	All

**SOURCE:** G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1978), p.65.

Jon Elster criticizes this because it omits the 'Asiatic mode of production.' Cohen's reason for doing so has much to do with the devastating historical criticisms of the Asiatic mode by Perry Anderson and others.<sup>36</sup> The result is that pre-capitalist relations of production in Asia are reduced to 'a sub-variety of serfdom'. Elster objects that while 'from the point of view of the immediate producers, the two [i.e., the Asiatic and feudal modes of production] may be indistinguishable', nevertheless 'the nature of the non-producing owners would presumably enter importantly into any analysis of the furthering or fettering of the productive forces by the relations of production'.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Harman, 'Base and Superstructure', p.22.

<sup>36</sup> See P. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974), pp.462-549.

<sup>37</sup> J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, 1985), pp.257-8. Elster's other main criticism of Cohen's ownership table is that it omits the guild system (pp.256-7).

Support for Elster's argument is provided by Chris Wickham in two very important articles. He argues that we must distinguish between the feudal mode, 'tenants paying rent to (or doing labour service for) a monopolistic landowning class', and the 'tributary mode of production', 'a state bureaucracy taxing a peasantry'.<sup>38</sup>

The two modes involve different forms of surplus-extraction, namely rent and tax: 'both are modes of surplus-extraction based on peasant production, individual or collective. Seen existentially from the peasant standpoint, there might seem not to be a lot of difference between them in that they are both unnecessary outgoings enforced, ultimately, by extra-economic coercion of various kinds'. Nevertheless: "States do not only tax peasants; they characteristically tax landlords too, at least in that they take a percentage from the surplus the landlord has extracted .... One arena in which tax is thus very definitely opposed to rent lies in the structural antagonism there is between the state (unless it is a feudal state) and the landed aristocracy".

Wickham argues that pre-capitalist Asian Social formations combined the tributary and feudal modes. The distinctiveness of western Europe lay in the fact that the collapse of the Roman Empire involved the gradual establishment of feudalism as the dominant mode of production.<sup>39</sup>

This analysis backs up Elster's argument that the relations of production include both 'the relation of the producers to the means of production and their own labour-power' and 'the nature of the non-producing owners, if any'.<sup>40</sup> Only such a definition can capture one very important aspect of Marx's analysis of capitalism. That is, the claim that 'capital exists and can only exist as many capitals, and its self-determination

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<sup>38</sup> C. Wickham, 'The Other Transition', *Past and Present*, 103 (1984), p.6; C. Wickham, 'The Uniqueness of the East', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 12:2 & 3 (1985), p.170.

<sup>39</sup> Wickham, 'Uniqueness', pp.183, 184; on the rise of Western feudalism, see 'Other Transition.' Draper argues that Marx's analysis of 'Oriental Despotism' is one of a tributary mode of production: *Theory*, 1, ch.22.

<sup>40</sup> Elster, *Making Sense*, p.258. He adds a third condition, 'the rules governing acquisition and transfer of property', reflecting his Quixotic desire to elevate the guild system into a mode of production.

therefore appears as their reciprocal interaction with one another'. The form this interaction takes is competition, and it is by virtue of competition that capitals are compelled to extract and accumulate surplus-value: 'Competition is nothing more than the way in which the many capitals forced the inherent determinants upon one another and upon themselves' so that 'the influence of individual capitals on one another has the effect precisely that they must conduct themselves as capital'.<sup>41</sup> No account of capitalist relations of production which does not take note of the division of the exploiting class into competing capitals will therefore be adequate.

The relations of production also include a third element - the form of exploitation - in addition to the relationship of the direct producers to the means of production and their own labour-power and the nature of any non-producing owners. Effective possession of at least some means of production and even of labour-power itself enables non-labourers to exploit the direct producers. Exploitation is the appropriation of surplus-labour. That is, it consists in compelling the direct producers to work longer than is necessary to produce the means of subsistence for themselves and their dependents: 'wherever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the worker, free or unfree, must add to the labour-time necessary for his own maintenance an extra quantity of means of subsistence for the owner of the means of production'. Modes of production can be distinguished according to the particular mode of appropriation of surplus-labour each involves: 'what distinguishes the various economic formations of society... is the form in which this surplus-labour is in each case extorted from the immediate producers.'<sup>42</sup>

Whether or not we choose strictly to include classes in the relations of production, they possess a conceptual connection to exploitation. As G.E.M. de Ste Croix puts it, 'class... is essentially the way in which exploitation is reflected in a social structure'.<sup>43</sup> Marx's own discussion of the concept of class is unsystematic. In Althusser's words:

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<sup>41</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp.414, 651, 657.

<sup>42</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, pp.344, 325.

<sup>43</sup> G.E.M. de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London, 1981), p.51.

'The reader will know how Volume Three [of Capital] ends. A title: *Classes*, Forty lines, then silence'.<sup>44</sup>

Connecting exploitation and class implies a further link to class struggle. Erik Olin Wright states the premisses providing the link. Class structure involves 'an intrinsic antagonism' and that 'manifest class behaviour is fundamentally determined by class structure'. Given these premisses, 'then class struggle itself becomes an intrinsic rather than a contingent consequence of the structure of class relations'.<sup>45</sup>

Ste Croix goes further to equate class struggle and exploitation: 'I use the expression class struggle for the fundamental relationships between classes (and their respective individual members), involving essentially exploitation, or resistance to it. It does not necessarily involve collective action, and it may or may not include activity on a political plane'. Ste Croix takes this course because he insists that both classes and class struggle may exist even where they do not involve 'class consciousness and active political conflict'.<sup>46</sup>

To summarize, every mode of production involves a particular combination of the forces and relations of production. The productive forces are the labour-process, the particular technical combination of labour-power and means of production employed in order to transform nature and to produce use-values, thereby determining a particular level of productivity. The production relations comprise the relationship of the direct producers to the means of production and their labour-power, the nature of any non-producing owners and the mode of appropriation of surplus-labour from the direct producers by any such owners. This mode of surplus-extraction or exploitation, in turn determines the class structure, so that classes are defined relationally, by their objective relationship both to the means of production and labour-power and to other classes. Exploitation in turn gives rise to class struggle. Social formations typically comprise elements of more than one mode of production, with one mode, however, dominant.

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<sup>44</sup> Althusser and Balibar, *Reading*, p.193.

<sup>45</sup> Wright, *Class Structure*, p.22.

<sup>46</sup> Ste Croix, *Class Struggle*, pp.44, 57-69.

### Orthodox Historical Materialism

Ste Croix says that Weber's account of classes and status groups lack 'any organic relationship with one another' and so 'are not dynamic in character but merely lie side to side, so to speak, like numbers in a row'. The Marxist theory of classes<sup>47</sup> is concerned by contrast not to describe social gradations, but to explain 'social change'.<sup>48</sup>

Marxism does more than seek to account for historical transformations. As Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober put it, it does so '*historically, by reference* to processes that are endogenous to the very historical systems it identifies as its proper domain. In this regard, it is a radically historical theory, different in kind from (Darwinian) evolutionary theory and also from rival accounts of historical change which, like evolutionary theory, conceive historical change as the effect of exogenous variables on *historical communities*'.

In this sense, 'historical materialism retains the radical historicity of the Hegelian view of history. While, at the same time, maintaining, unlike its Hegelian predecessor, the explanatory objectives of modern science'.<sup>49</sup>

There are two respects in which Hegel's thought is inconsistent with 'the explanatory objectives of modern science'. First, it treats the world, natural, social and mental, as the self-realization of the Absolute Idea. Secondly, this process of self-realization has triadic structure, that of determinate negation, in which antagonisms are first developed and then reconciled in the negation of the negation, which is the culmination and the goal of both reality as such and of each particular stage in its development. These two aspects are connected conceptually: the Absolute is nothing other than the dialectical process of original unity, first negation and the negation of negation. Both are incompatible with historical materialism. There is no materialist

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<sup>47</sup> Classes are conceived as necessarily in relation to one another by virtue of their roots in exploitation.

<sup>48</sup> Ste Croix, *Class Struggle*, pp.90-1.

<sup>49</sup> A. Levine and E. Sober, 'What's Historical about Historical Materialism', *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXII, 6 (1985), p.322.

dialectical 'method' which can be extracted from Hegel's idealist 'system'. Equally, the dialectic of nature developed by Engels and other Marxists is nothing but the speculative projection of Hegelian categories onto the physical world.<sup>50</sup>

There is however, a limited sense in which historical materialism can be said to be 'dialectical'. It is plausible to regard Marx as believing that contradictions exist in social reality. But contradictions of this kind have nothing to do with either Hegelian determinate negation or logical contradictions of the form (p.- p). Rather they are antagonisms intrinsic to a social structure. Such a structural contradiction exists if and only if:

1. a relationship exists between two or more social entities;
2. the social entities are constituted by virtue of their being terms of the relationship;
3. the entities are mutually interdependent by virtue of the relationship;
4. the entities are potentially in conflict by virtue of the relationship.

The main types of social entities here are structures. For example, production relations and productive forces, and collectivities such as classes. The paradigmatic case of a structural contradiction is between the forces and relations of production. Therborn and Ste Croix argue mainly on the basis of Marx's own usage that 'it is possible to speak of a contradiction between the forces and the relations of production, but not between classes'.<sup>51</sup> This approach is too restrictive. It fails to consider why one might wish to locate structural contradictions. As Elster suggests, 'the notion of a social contradiction has the theoretical function of identifying causes of instability and change'.<sup>52</sup> Such a view accords well with Marx's criticism of Proudhon for dividing contradictions into separate 'good' and 'bad' sides. Proudhon thus fails to recognize that

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Rosen's discussion of the intrinsic relationship between Hegel's 'method' and 'system' is definitive: *The Hegelian Dialectic and its Criticism* (Cambridge, 1982).

<sup>51</sup> Therborn, *Science*, p.396. Compare Ste Croix, *Class Struggle*, p.50.

<sup>52</sup> Elster, *Making Sense*, p.48.

'dialectical movement is the co-existence of two contradictory sides, their conflict and their fusion into a new category' and that 'it is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history by providing a struggle'.<sup>53</sup> There is no reason not to include exploitation and class-relations among the structural contradictions which give rise to the 'bad side' of history and hence to struggle and change. In the case of the capitalist mode the competitive interaction of 'many capitals' also fulfil the conditions of a structural contradiction. Finally, such a contradiction should not be equated with actual conflict but thought of rather as a tendency towards such conflict.<sup>54</sup>

The central difficulty with historical materialism is how the two principal contradictions<sup>55</sup> relate to one another to bring about social transformations. One answer<sup>56</sup> is given by Marx: 'At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production.... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.'<sup>57</sup>

On the basis of this passage a version of Marxism has been developed<sup>58</sup> which gives an account: (a) '*of necessary (material) conditions of change* (where what is possible depends on the level of development of productive forces); (b) of the direction of change (since economic structures change to maximize the level of development of productive forces and are therefore cumulative and irreversible); (c) of the means through which change is achieved (class struggle); and finally (d) of sufficient conditions for

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53 K. Marx and F. Engels, *CW*, VI, pp.168, 174.

54 Compare Giddens, *Central Problems*, p.141.

55 Those between the forces and relations of production, and between classes.

56 The development of the productive forces is the motor of historical change.

57 K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (London, 1971), p.21.

58 What Levine and Sober call 'orthodox historical materialism.'



change (since what is possible is, in the long run, necessary.<sup>59</sup>

Cohen's version of orthodox historical materialism (hereafter OHM) turns on two propositions:

- (a) The productive forces tend to develop throughout history (the Development Thesis).
- (b) The nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces (the Primacy Thesis proper).<sup>60</sup>

If true, these claims would together account for historical change. Since according to them the continuous development of productive forces compels the transformation of production relations whenever the prevailing set ceases to maximize the growth of these forces.

### The Primacy Thesis

Cohen's originality lies in claiming that the relationship between the productive forces and production relations can be accounted for only by means of functional explanation: 'we hold that the character of the forces functionally explains the character of the relations.... The favoured relations take this form: the production relations are of kind R at time t because relations of kind R are suitable to the use and development of the productive forces given the level of development of the latter at t'.<sup>61</sup>

Cohen gives a widely discussed account of functional explanations where they are a sub-type of 'consequence - explanations'. A consequence law invoked in such explanations has the following form:

If it is the case that if an event of type E were to occur at t1,  
then it would bring about an event of type F at t2 THEN  
an event of type E occurs at t3.

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<sup>59</sup> Levine and Sober, 'What's Historical', pp.313-14.

<sup>60</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, p.134.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160.

A consequence-explanation is thus one where, 'very roughly, ... the character of what is explained is determined by its effect on what explains it'. It is not, however, a teleological explanation, in which an event is explained by some future event which it will bring about.<sup>62</sup> For, 'it is the fact that were an event of a certain type of occur, it would have a certain effect, which explains the occurrence of an event of the stated type.' Consequence-explanations appeal to some 'dispositional fact' of the form given by the hypothetical sentence relating events of type E and F in the consequence law, not to some future state of affairs. 'A functional explanation is a consequence-explanation in which the occurrence of the explanandum event [one of type E in the consequence law]... is "functional for something or other, whatever "functional" turns out to mean.'<sup>63</sup>

In the case of historical materialism, 'functional' means crucially 'tending to promote the development of the productive forces'.<sup>64</sup> One standard criticism of the Primacy Thesis is that Marx treats capitalist relations of production as preceding and making possible the productive forces characteristic of this mode, above all machinofacture. Thus he distinguishes between the 'formal and real subsumption of labour under capital'. The formal subsumption involves the introduction of capitalist relations with a productive base consisting in handicraft methods inherited from the feudal mode. This is the phase of manufacture, which is followed by the 'real subsumption'. This occurs when the labour-process is transformed as a result of the large-scale introduction of machinery.<sup>65</sup>

Cohen says that the relation between the productive forces and the production relations is not a simple causal one, in which the former's development causes changes in the latter. In fact, the relations of production is functional to the force's development. As Cohen puts it, 'the bare fact that economic structures develop the productive forces

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<sup>62</sup> The goal or purpose of the first event, Aristotle's final cause.

<sup>63</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, pp.259-60, 278, 261, 263.

<sup>64</sup> Although Cohen also believes that the superstructure is functional to the relations of production in the sense of tending to stabilize the relations.

<sup>65</sup> See Marx, *Capital*, I, part 4, and 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production'.

does not prejudice their primacy, for forces select structures according to their capacity to promote development.<sup>66</sup> The capacity of capitalist relations of production to revolutionize the labour-process does not contradict the Primacy Thesis, for it is precisely this capacity which explains their existence.

Cohen's Primacy Thesis is vulnerable, however, to objections to his reliance on functional explanations. This issue has been central to the debate between Cohen and Elster. Elster argues that functional explanations are legitimate in biology. Here the properties of organisms are explained functionally, in terms of their tendency to maximize the reproductive capacity of the organisms concerned. Such explanations are not teleological, since the maximization of reproductive capacity is not the consciously adopted or objectively required goal of organisms, but is enforced on them by the mechanism of natural selection. It is a blind and purposeless process whose structure can only be captured by probabilistic laws. It consists in the interaction between populations of organisms and their environment.<sup>67</sup>

Elster argues that functional explanation has, however, a much more limited role to play in social theory. He tries to bring this out by giving 'a valid, if rarely instantiated, form of functional explanation' of the social world:

An institution or a behavioural pattern X is explained by its function Y for group Z if and only if:

- (1) Y is an effect of X;
- (2) Y is beneficial for Z;
- (3) Y is unintended by the actors producing X;
- (4) Y - or atleast the causal relation between X and Y - is unrecognized by the actors in Z;
- (5) Y maintains X by a causal feedback loop passing through Z.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, p.162; see also p.180.

<sup>67</sup> See J. Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 1; and *Explaining Technical Change* (Cambridge, 1983), pp.49-55. *On Natural selection*, see especially F. Jacob, *The Logic of Living Systems* (London, 1974); and E. Sober, *The Nature of Selection* (Cambridge, MA, 1984).

<sup>68</sup> *Elster, Explaining*, p.57. See also Elster, *Ulysses*, p.28.

The crucial condition is (5). If we take (1) and (2) together to be the rough counterpart of the sort of 'dispositional fact' which consequence - explanations invoke, then (5) specifies the mechanism which accounts for this fact. (5) demands that we should find some mechanism comparable to natural selection in biology. Elster claims that 'functionalist sociologists argue as if criterion (5) is automatically filled whenever the other criteria are'. The result is 'an objective teleology, a process that has no subject, yet has a goal'. He argues that Marx and his successors are often guilty of this conflation. 'Marxist social scientists tend to compound the general functionalist fallacy with another one, the assumption that long-term consequences can explain their causes even when there is no intentional action or selection'.<sup>69</sup>

Cohen commits neither of these fallacies. However, in effect he denies that specifying the mechanism whose existence is required by (5) is a necessary condition of a valid functional explanation. The reason is that 'a consequence - explanation may well be confirmed (in the sense that 'instances satisfying its major antecedent and consequence' are found to exist) in the absence of a theory as to how the dispositional property figures in the explanation of what it explains'. Therefore a functional explanation may be offered without an elaboration, that is, an account of how the functional fact contributes to explaining what it does'.<sup>70</sup> As Elster observes: 'Cohen's defence of functional explanation rests on epistemological considerations, not a substantive sociological theory. He argues that while knowledge of a mechanism is a sufficient condition for a successful explanation, and the existence of a mechanism a necessary condition, the knowledge is not a necessary condition'.<sup>71</sup>

This is a very weak defence of functional explanation. Thus, as Elster observes, Cohen provides no criterion for distinguishing between 'explanatory and non-explanatory

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<sup>69</sup> Elster, *Explaining*, pp.59-60. See also Elster, *Making Sense*.

<sup>70</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, p.266. See also pp.271, 285-6; and G.A. Cohen, 'Functional Explanation: Reply to Elster', *Political Studies*, XXXVIII, 1 (1980), p.131.

<sup>71</sup> Elster, *Explaining*, p.64.

correlations'.<sup>72</sup> In other words, events of type X may accompany those of type Y, which have beneficial consequences to group Z, without there being a 'dispositional fact' linking them. To assert otherwise is to commit the functionalist fallacy. Cohen concedes this but argues that the comparable 'fallacy post hoc ergo propter hoc does not disqualify causal explanations'.<sup>73</sup> Much of the difficulty with Cohen's defence of functional explanation derives ultimately from an empiricist conception of science where to explain is to isolate regularities linking types of events.<sup>74</sup>

Philippe van Parijs offers an elaborate account of functional explanations as specifying the equilibrium states towards which certain complex systems tend. On this basis he takes the Primacy Thesis to claim that there are laws of correspondence between particular sets of productive forces and production relations such that the relations adapt to the level of development of the forces more rapidly than they promote the expansion of the forces.<sup>75</sup> But to assert that there are such laws is not to say what they are. Van Parijs does not mention what the specific mechanisms are which account for the fact that

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<sup>72</sup> Elster, *Explaining*, p.66.

<sup>73</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, p.282.

<sup>74</sup> See R. Harre and E. Madden, *Causal Powers*, (Oxford, 1975); and R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Hassocks, 1975). Elster has recently retreated from the criticisms of functional explanation. He now says of Cohen's analysis of functional explanations that 'it is vulnerable to strong pragmatic objections, but on the level of principle, it is hard to fault it', 'Further Thoughts on Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', in Roemer ed., *Analytical Marxism*, p.204. This retreat is quite unnecessary. As Harre and Madden argue, 'the only sure way of distinguishing lawful and accidental universal statements is to point out that in the former cases we see why the regularity must hold, while in the latter we do not'. Harre and Madden, *Causal Powers*, p.37. But this condition can be met only by identifying the mechanism responsible for this regularity: see Bhaskar, *Realist Theory*. If this is so, then Cohen's weaker condition, that a consequence-explanation is valid so long as some mechanism exists even if we do not know what it is, is inherently unsatisfactory, not merely objectionable on 'pragmatic' grounds. For more on Elster's retreat, see 'Further Thoughts', pp.202-7, and his exchange with Allen Wood in *Inquiry*, 29: 1 (1986).

<sup>75</sup> P. van Parijs, *Evolutionary Explanation in the Social Sciences* (London, 1981); and 'Marx's Central Puzzle', in T. Ball and J. Farr eds., *After Marx* (Cambridge, 1984).

certain production relations exist because they tend to promote the development of the productive forces.

Andrew Levine decomposes 'the case for the Primacy Thesis, in Cohen's reconstruction... into a number of distinct theses' which do not rely on functional explanations:

1. **The Compatibility Thesis:** A given level of development of the productive forces is compatible with only a limited range of relations of production.

'Compatibility' here has a precise sense: forces and relations of production are compatible whenever the relations of production allow for the further development of the productive forces, and whenever productive forces help to strengthen and reproduce existing relations of production...

2. **The Development Thesis:** Productive forces tend to develop throughout history...

3. **The Contradiction Thesis:** Given (1) and (2)...: the productive forces will develop to a point where they are no longer compatible with-where they contradict - the relations of production under which they had previously developed...

4. **The Transformation Thesis:** Where forces and relations of production are incompatible (as they are bound to become so long as class society persists), then, given (1) and (3) the relations will change in a way that will re-establish compatibility between forces and relations of production...

5. **The Optimality Thesis:** When a given set of relations of production become fetters on the further development of the productive forces and are transformed, then, given (2) and (4) they will be replaced by relations of production that are functionally optimal for the further development of the productive forces...

6. **The Capacity Thesis:** Where there is an 'objective' interest in progressive social change, the capacity for bringing that change about will ultimately be brought into being.<sup>76</sup>

The two key theses are (2) and (6). The Development Thesis imparts an asymmetry to the relation between the forces and relations of production. This generates

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<sup>76</sup> A. Levine, *Arguing for Socialism* (London, 1984), pp.164-74.

situations where the relations fetter the forces of production. The Capacity Thesis predicts that contradictions of this kind will be resolved by social revolutions which introduce relations of production compatible with the productive forces. The reason why this will happen is that the fettering relations of production involve a class with both an interest in, and the capacity to effect such a transformation. Levine says that the Capacity Thesis is implied by the Primacy Thesis, but it is better seen as specifying the mechanism demanded by Elster. If (2) and (6) were true, then, given also (1), OHM would be true.

Cohen himself offers the following argument for (2).

'A measure of acceptance of the Development Thesis may be motivated by reflection on three facts:

- (c) Men are... somewhat rational.
- (d) The historical situation of men is one of scarcity.
- (e) Men possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situation.'<sup>77</sup>

Cohen recommends this argument because it helps to explain 'the notable lack of regression' of the productive forces. Confronted with one notable case of such regression<sup>78</sup> he comments: 'If we would devise a concept of a normal society comparable to that of a normal organism, we could then distinguish between historical theory and historical pathology, and we could enter the Development Thesis within the former.'<sup>79</sup>

Modern European historiography virtually originates in Gibbon's attempt to describe and explain the disintegration of the Roman Empire. Cohen himself describes historical materialism as 'a theory about epochs': how can he then exclude from its

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<sup>77</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, pp.152-3.

<sup>78</sup> The collapse of classical antiquity in the West.

<sup>79</sup> G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, p.156.

purview one of the most important epochal changes in world history?<sup>80</sup> The distinction between 'historical theory' and 'historical pathology' not only has biologicistic overtones but also bears a resemblance to the kind of 'conventionalist strategems' which Popper condemned because of their use to rescue hypotheses from refutation by empirical counter-examples.

One reason why Cohen's discussion of regression is so unsatisfactory is that empirical support for the Development Thesis is not as strong as he implies. There is, for example, the immensely important case of China, which between 1300 and 1800 experienced first decline and then stagnation of the productive forces.<sup>81</sup> Joshua Cohen observes that, for Cohen, 'blocked development' of this kind 'is counter-evidence to the Marxist theory of history'. He suggests that we should rather regard such cases as pointing to a central flaw in Cohen's argument from premisses(c), (d) and (e) to the Development Thesis, namely that it abstracts from agents' conflicting class interests: 'The fact that individuals have an interest in improving their material situation, and are intelligent enough to devise ways of doing it, does not so far provide them with an interest in improving the forces of production. Only under specific structural conditions is the interest in material advantage tied to an interest in a strategy of productivity enhancing investment.'<sup>82</sup>

The Primacy Thesis, and with it OHM, could only be salvaged if the Capacity Thesis were true. Defending himself against the criticism that the Primacy Thesis leaves no place for the class struggle, Cohen writes: 'I do not wish to deny that class struggle is always essential for social transformation. But 'if we want to know why class struggle effects this change rather than that, we must turn to the dialectic of forces and relations of production which governs class behaviour and is not explicable in terms of it, and

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<sup>80</sup> G.A. Cohen, 'Reconsidering Historical Materialism', in J.R. Pennock and J.W. Chapman, *Marxism: Nomos XXVI* (New York, 1983), p.228.

<sup>81</sup> See M.Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (London, 1973).

<sup>82</sup> J.Cohen, review of KMTH, *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIX, 5 (1982), pp. 271, 268.



which determines what the long-term outcome of class struggle will be.<sup>83</sup> Cohen has sought to make this thesis consistent with the fact that human action is required to bring about epochal social changes.

There is quite unendurable strain on Cohen's reliance on the assumption that human beings are 'somewhat rational' to explain historical change. Given that the exploited class has an interest in social revolution, it does not follow, as the Capacity Thesis asserts, that it has the means to act on this interest. As Levine urges, 'class capacities for struggle - the organizational, ideological and material resources available to class agents- are not identical to class interests in the outcomes of struggles'. 'Thus slaves undoubtedly have an interest in overthrowing their masters, but have generally been unable to do so: the only successful slave rising was made possible by the French Revolution. Therefore, as Levine puts it, 'there is no necessary connection between the development of an objective interest in epochal social change and the development of class capacities for bringing about epochal transformations.'<sup>84</sup>

Even where the exploited class has both an interest in, and the capacity to accomplish social revolution, it does not follow that the overthrow of capitalism is inevitable.

### **Rational-Choice Marxism**

'Elster says that 'in Marx's philosophy of history... humanity appears as a collective subject whose inherent striving towards full realization shapes the course of history. Within the theory of capitalism, capital plays a similar role.' At the same time, 'Marx was also committed to methodological individualism, at least intermittently. The German Ideology, in particular, rests on a strong individualist and anti-teleological approach to history'.<sup>85</sup> Elster proposes that we resolve this ambiguity by salvaging

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<sup>83</sup> G.A. Cohen, 'Forces and Relations of Production', in B. Matthews ed., *Marx: A Hundred Years On* (London 1983), pp.123, 121.

<sup>84</sup> Levine, *Arguing*, pp.174, 176.

<sup>85</sup> Elster, *Making Sense*, pp.6-7.

from the ruins of OHM a consistently methodological individualist version of Marxism.

The one precedent for rational-choice Marxism is Sartre's unfinished masterpiece, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Here Sartre seeks to free Marxism from the naturalist ontology which the 'dogmatic dialectic' of Diamat had imposed on it. To do so requires taking individual agents as the initial premiss of historical materialism: 'If we do not wish the dialectic to become a divine law again, a metaphysical fate, it must proceed first from individuals and not from some kind of supra-individual ensemble... the dialectical movement is not some powerful unitary force revealing itself behind History like the will of God. It is first and foremost a resultant; it is not the dialectic which forces historical men to live their history in terrible contradictions; it is men, as they are, dominated by scarcity and necessity, and confronting one another in circumstances which History or economics can inventory, but which only dialectical reason can explain'.<sup>86</sup>

To hold that 'the entire historical dialectic rests on individual praxis' is not, however, to regard human beings as in control of their own history. On the contrary, their union with 'matter',<sup>87</sup> is what Sartre calls 'the passive motor of History'. It takes 'a particular and contingent form, since the whole of human development, at least up to now, has been scarcity'. The particular sense in which the dialectical movement is a result of individual actions can only be understood by means of 'a study of the type of passive action which materiality as such exerts on man and his History by returning a stolen praxis to man in the form of a counter-finality'. Sartre here has in mind what he believes to be the general property of human action that the pursuit of individual goals is typically self-defeating, leading to undesired consequences. The example he gives is of Chinese peasants who, by clearing land, bring about deforestation and thereby cause floods. Thus, 'in being realized, human ends define a field of counter-finality around themselves'.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> J-P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London, 1976), pp.36-7.

<sup>87</sup> That is, the labour they perform to meet their needs.

<sup>88</sup> J-P. Sartre, *Critique*, pp.80, 122, 123, 161, 164. Elster also uses the example of peanuts causing soil erosion by clearing trees as a case of collective irrationality: *Sour Grapes* (Cambridge, 1983), pp.27-9.

There is an important conceptual similarity between Sartre's theory and that propounded by Elster and his co-thinkers. Methodological individualism (hereafter MI) involves treating social structures as the unintended consequences of individual actions. Elster suggests that we take counter-finality as characterizing the negative unintended consequences of our actions. He tries to give a perspicuous account of counter-finality as involving the fallacy of composition. 'what is possible for any single individual must be possible for all of them simultaneously.' He suggests that counter-finality consists in 'the unintended consequences that arise when each individual in a group acts upon an assumption about his relations to others that, when generalized, yields the contradiction in the consequent of the fallacy of composition, the antecedent of that fallacy being true.' Thus a Chinese peasant commits the fallacy of composition when he clears land in the belief that because his doing so alone will not cause floods his doing so together with all other peasants will also not cause floods. Elster holds that counter-finality thus understood is the only valid instance of social contradiction.<sup>89</sup>

Sartre's aim is 'to establish' 'that there is one human history, with one truth and one intelligibility'.<sup>90</sup> Perry Anderson suggests that the attempt is a failure. Why this is so is clear from the extended discussion of the fate of the Russian Revolution, which forms the focus of the second volume. 'Sartre was unable to demonstrate how the ravaging struggles of the time generated an ultimate structural unity', falling back onto the implicit assumption that 'Soviet society was held together by the dictatorial force wielded by Stalin, a monocentric sovereignty imposing a repressive unification of all the praxes within it.'<sup>91</sup> Such an analysis contradicts Sartre's view of history as a 'totalization without a totalizer', a unified and intelligible process which, however, lacks

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<sup>89</sup> J. Elster, *Logic and Society* (London, 1978), pp.99,106. See also Elster, *Making Sense*, p.37.

<sup>90</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, p.69.

<sup>91</sup> Anderson, *Arguments*, p.53. See generally *ibid.*, pp.51-3; and R. Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre - Philosophy in the World* (London, 1980), pp.275-86.

either an individual or collective subject.<sup>92</sup>

Anderson argues that Sartre's abandonment of the incomplete second volume of the *Critique* reflected this theoretical impasse. He implies that this failure counts against any attempt to base historical materialism on the individual subject. Thus counter-finality is a general property of human action,<sup>93</sup> but because the practice involves working up 'matter' in order to meet the needs in conditions of scarcity: 'matter alienates in itself the action which works it... because its inertia allows it to absorb the labour-power of Others and to turn it back against everyone'. Counter-finality occurs by virtue of 'matter' and involves human action assuming the properties of 'matter': 'The first thing that is necessary for counter-finality to exist is that it should be adumbrated by a kind of disposition of matter (in this case the geological and hydrological structure of China)... Second, human praxis has to become a fatality and to be absorbed by inertia, taking on both the strictures of physical causation and the obstinate precision of human labour.... Last, and most important, the activity must be carried on elsewhere: peasants everywhere must burn or uproot the scrub'.<sup>94</sup>

Only the third condition refers to the fallacy of composition on which Elster bases his account of counter-finality. That it is the 'most important' of the three may be doubted. Sartre treats social structures, the unintended consequences of action, as the 'practico-inert'. 'inverted praxis', that is, practice which has taken on the properties of 'matter'. Thus, by virtue of counter-finality, 'worked matter... becomes, by and for men, the fundamental force of History.' It is the 'practico-inert', the materialized consequences of their practice, which unifies human actions so that, for example, 'class-being' is 'the practico-inert statute of individual or common praxis', 'inert collective being, as the inorganic common materiality of all the members of a given ensemble'. And such unification depends on the 'practico-inert' because human beings relate to one another

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<sup>92</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, p.817.

<sup>93</sup> Not because, as Elster suggests, human beings tend to commit the fallacy of composition.

<sup>94</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, pp.151, 162-3.

as 'radically Other-that is to say, as threatening us with death'. The possibility of class antagonisms arises from the fact that 'the relations of production are established and pursued by individuals who are always ready to believe that the Other is an anti-human member of an alien species.'<sup>95</sup>

At the core of this way of thinking about social relations is the conception of an isolated self confronted with an inert and alien world. That is, the Critique presupposes the metaphysics of Being and Nothingness. It is the conflict between an essentially Cartesian subject and the material world on which it is dependent by virtue of the fact of its being an embodied self. But it is compelled to negate the material world if it is to be a subject, and not just to become swallowed up in the inert matter surrounding it. In the Critique this account of the relation between self and world is projected onto history, so that the subject is constantly baffled by the transformation of its practice into the 'practico-inert'. The possibility of co-operative social relations and of relations which allow us collectively to control the objective environment of our actions are ruled out a priori. As Aronson puts it, 'in the analyst of scarcity we once again meet the philosopher of "hell is other people".'<sup>96</sup>

The importance of identifying the philosophical underpinnings of the Critique lies in the fact that is by no means obvious that methodological individualism requires this kind of metaphysical individualism. It is perfectly coherent to see human beings as embodied agents involved in social relations that are as much co-operative as antagonistic and still to assert that the structures present in these relations are merely the unintended consequences of individual actions. MI is a claim about valid social explanations and not (necessarily) a theory which conceives human beings as isolated and competitive monads.<sup>97</sup> Therefore the failure of the Critique does not of itself count against attempts to formulate an individualist version of historical materialism.

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<sup>95</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, pp.165, 183, 251, 132, 149.

<sup>96</sup> Aronson, *Sartre*, p.257. See generally *ibid.*, pp.243-86.

<sup>97</sup> See Rajeev Bhargava, *Individualism in Social Science* (Oxford, 1992).

### Structural Capacities and Human Action

Elster argues that the only way to avoid the teleological proclivities of Marx's quasi- Hegelian philosophy of history is to espouse methodological individualism (MI) <sup>98</sup> This involves 'a search for microfoundations of Marxist social theory', deriving its theorems from premisses which mention only individuals and their attributes. The explanation of social events should take the form of 'mixed causal-intentional explanation-intentional understanding of the individual actions, and causal explanation of their interaction'.<sup>99</sup>

On the basis of this general conception of social science, Elster particularly recommends game theory. He characterizes it as involving 'strategic' interactions, i.e those where 'each actor has to take account of the intentions of all other actors, including the fact that their intentions are based upon their expectations concerning his own.'<sup>100</sup> The standard work on game theory treats it as a generalization of neo-classical economics concerned particularly with analysing conflicts of interests as situations of individual decision-making in conditions of risk. That is, conditions where the outcome of a particular game (or set of decisions) cannot be predicted with certainty, but where each outcome has a known probability. Some of the chief premisses of game theory originate in neo-classical economics. Thus it is assumed that each player's preferences can be represented by a linear utility function and that he or she will act rationally in the sense of always choosing the alternative with the greater utility. The most famous result in game theory is the Prisoner's Dilemma, where the optimal outcome for the two players requires both to co-operate in circumstances where they have good reason not to co-operate, so that equilibrium is reached only where the solution is sub-optimal for both

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<sup>98</sup> The doctrine that all social phenomena (their structure and change) are explicable only in terms of individuals- their properties, goals, and beliefs.

<sup>99</sup> Elster, 'Marxism, Functionalism', pp.453, 454, 463. This is a stronger version of MI than Popper's. Popper concedes that 'our actions cannot be explained without reference to our social environment, to social institutions and to their manner of functioning'; *The Open Society and its Enemies* (2 vols, London, 1966), II,p.90.

<sup>100</sup> Elster, *Ulysses*, p.18.

players, even though the decision each player makes is rational for that player.<sup>101</sup>

Elster argues that 'game theory is invaluable to any analysis of the historical process that centres on exploitation, struggle, alliances, and revolution.'<sup>102</sup>

Elster States: 'The basic premisses of rational choice theory [i.e. game theory and neo-classical economics are (1) that structural constraints do not completely determine the actions taken by individuals in a society, and (2) within the feasible set of actions compatible with the constraints individuals choose those they believe will bring the best results.'<sup>103</sup> (1) is undoubtedly true. (2) is accepted here as true for the purposes of argument. Certainly some assumption about agents' rationality is essential.

There are three reasons for accepting (1). First, the orthodox conception of agents and the theory of human nature in which it is embedded would be empty if agents did not have more than one outcome between which genuinely to choose. There would be little point in ascribing beliefs and desires to agents if their course of action were structurally determined in advance.

Secondly, to regard human actions as so structurally determined is inconsistent with Marxism. Marx's theory of history is better captured by the passage from the Manifesto where he declares that the class struggle can end 'either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes'.<sup>104</sup>

The third reason for accepting (1) is negative. It springs from reflection on the alternative, on the sorts of social theories which do treat individual actions as structurally determined in that the structural context of action permits only one outcome. Typically such theories treat agents as 'cultural dopes', the bearers of social norms and values which dictate their actions. As Adam Przeworski puts it, 'the society becomes internal to individuals who manifest this internalized society in their actions.'<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See R.D. Luce and H. Raiffa, *Games and Decisions* (New York, 1957).

<sup>102</sup> Elster, 'Marxism, Functionalism', p.453.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.464.

<sup>104</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *CW*, VI, p.485.

<sup>105</sup> A. Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge, 1985), p.93.

The prime example of this approach is Parsons' 'normative functionalism'. But there is no shortage of Marxist versions. The result is a kind of vulgar functionalism. One effect is that such concepts as 'error' and 'miscalculation' cease to have any application in the explanation of social events.

There are sophisticated exponents of the cock-up theory of history. A.J.P. Taylor is the prime example among historians who exposes with mastery the role played by chance in great events. But one does not have to be one to insist that social events do not simply conceal a hidden meaning which subsumes them. The classic Marxist discussion of 'the role of the individual in history' is of Plekhanov's. He makes two fundamental points. First, 'individuals often exercise considerable influence upon the fate of society, but this influence is determined by the internal structure of that society and by its relation to other societies.' Secondly: 'It has long been observed that great talents appear whenever the social conditions favourable to their development exist. This means that every man of talent who actually appears, every man of talent who becomes a social force, is the product of social relations. Since this is the case, it is clear why talented people... can change only individual features of events, but not their general trend; they are themselves the product of this trend; were it not for that trend they never would have crossed the threshold that divides the potential from the real'.<sup>106</sup>

But it is in fact not clear at all why it should follow from two undoubtedly true propositions<sup>107</sup> that such influence cannot affect the 'general trend' of events. Plekhanov's entire discussion is permeated by Hegel's concept of the 'world-historic individual'. His greatness depends precisely on the way in which he fulfils the needs of History in his epoch. Ernest Mandel has sought to develop Plekhanov's account by analysing the 'selection mechanisms' through which a class assures that it has an appropriate leadership.

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<sup>106</sup> G.V. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (London, 1969), pp.164, 171.

<sup>107</sup> (a) The opportunities individuals have to influence events depend on the structure of social relations and (b) These individuals themselves are shaped by social relations.



Alasdair MacIntyre comments that there are two different conceptions of history. One in which 'history from time to time presents us with real alternatives where my actions can make all the difference', the other in which 'I am... just part of an inevitable historical progress.'<sup>108</sup>

These considerations lead to two conclusions. First, the only entities to which purposes may be assigned are intentional systems, the bearers of beliefs and desires, i.e. human agents. More particularly, social systems do not have purposes. Nor is it proper to regard them as having needs. Functionalism suggests that these needs are necessarily fulfilled. An all-too-common version of this kind of reasoning among Marxists is as follows:

- (1) A social formation requires certain conditions for its reproduction.
- (2) These conditions exist.
- (3) These conditions exist because they are necessary to the reproduction of that social formation.

The underlying assumption which justifies this inference is that social formations will necessarily be reproduced. This is a static view of society for Marxists to accept. It does not follow sometimes suggests that it is therefore wrong to speak of functions tout court. It is often an important step in explanation to identify some social phenomenon which has beneficial consequences for some group and/or consequences which contribute to the reproduction of the social formation, provided that one does not<sup>109</sup> proceed to explain the phenomenon by these consequences.<sup>110</sup>

Secondly, the demand for 'microfoundations' cannot simply be rejected. If human agency is an irreducible aspect of social events, then no explanation of these events is tenable which does not make claims about the intentions and beliefs which actors have

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<sup>108</sup> A. MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (London, 1971), p.59, Commenting on I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast* (London, 1967), pp.242-7.

<sup>109</sup> Without specifying a feedback mechanism of the kind required by Elster.

<sup>110</sup> See E.O. Wright, 'Gidden's Critique of Marx', *New Left Review*, 138 (1983), pp.14-17.

and how these will issue in action. Given that the intentional activity of human beings is not structurally determined, then no explanation which does not contain premisses specifying how they will behave or are likely to behave in the situation under consideration, can be a genuine explanans. To the extent that those demanding 'microfoundations' are simply saying this, they are correct. But they are saying something stronger, namely that the explanation of social events is nothing but providing 'microfoundations'. Not only is this claim false, but it does not follow from the premisses of rational-choice theory. They are: (a) The denial that human conduct is structurally determined and (b) The rationality principle.

Elster describes the alternative to MI: 'Methodological collectivism - as an end in itself - assumes that there are supra-individual entities that are prior to individuals in the explanatory order. Explanation proceeds from the laws of self-regulation or of development of these larger entities while individual actions are derived from the aggregate pattern'.<sup>111</sup> This position leads naturally to functionalism. So, if Elster is right, we are stuck with the choice between MI and functionalism.

If Elster is claiming that the denial of MI entails the doctrine of 'methodological collectivism', then he is quite mistaken. For 'methodological collectivism' is the contrary of MI, not its contradictory. MI says that structures must be explained in terms of individuals. To deny this is just to say that structures cannot be explained in terms of individuals, not to say that individuals must be explained in terms of structures. All methodological collectivists (in Elster's sense) deny MI, but all those who deny MI are not ipso facto methodological collectivists.

All that the opponent of MI has to say is that social structures have explanatory autonomy. To say that social structures have explanatory autonomy is to say that they cannot be eliminated from the explanation of social events. It is not to say that individuals and their attributes can, or should be eliminated. The model of social explanation has to be one in which both individuals and structures figure irreducibly in the premisses of explanations of social events.

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<sup>111</sup> Elster, *Making Sense*, p.6.

'Individualist' explanations typically have structures concealed about them. Often the structures lurk in the *ceteris paribus* clause, or in the description of the situation in which the individual is trying rationally to optimize. But they may appear openly in the premisses of the individualist explanation.

An example of the individualist explanation is provided by Roemer when he seeks to prove the Class Exploitation Correspondence Principle for a dynamic capitalist economy. He makes the following assumption: 'all agents are accumulators, seeking to expand the value of their endowments (capital) as rapidly as possible.'<sup>112</sup> This axiom merely introduces one of the main structural properties of the capitalist mode for Marx.<sup>113</sup> Why they should do so is left unexplained by Roemer. Marx himself accounts for the accumulation of capital in terms of the competitive pressure of capitals on one another. It is perfectly legitimate for Roemer simply to place capital accumulation among the premisses of his proof of the Class Exploitation Correspondence Principle. But it does not alter the fact that the proof only appears to conform to MI, assuming as it does a structural property of the capitalist mode of production.

The sleight of hand through which Roemer turns this property into an attribute of individuals is typical of the way in which adherents to MI seek to conceal the reliance of their explanations on structures. This reliance is not a contingent feature of some explanations. But the explanation of social events necessarily involves premisses referring to both structures and individuals.

The most illuminating discussion of the relationship between structure and agency is to be found in Giddens's writings. He suggests that we think of structures as 'the unacknowledged conditions and unanticipated consequences of human action'. Such a perspective will resolve the long-standing 'dualism' of structure and action. It will allow

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<sup>112</sup> J. Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), p.113.

<sup>113</sup> The fact that capitalists tend to reinvest the surplus-value extracted from workers in further production rather than consuming all of it.

us to focus on what he calls 'the duality of structure'.<sup>114</sup> More specifically, structures are to be thought of not simply as constraining action, but also as enabling: 'structure is thus not to be conceptualized as a barrier to action, but as essentially involved in its production.'<sup>115</sup>

The duality of structure can only be understood once the conceptual connection between power and action is grasped. Action involves the exercise of 'transformative capacity', the ability to bring about some alteration in the course of events. Structures consist in the rules and resources which make possible, inter alia, the exercise of the more specific form of power which Giddens calls domination. It involves actors compelling others to comply with their wants. The dualism of agency and structure typical of contemporary discussions of political power, for example, can be overcome only 'if it is recognized that power must be treated in the context of the duality of structure: if the resources which the existence of domination implies and the exercise of power draws upon, are seen to be at the same structural components of social systems. The exercise of power is not a type of act; rather power is instantiated in action, as a regular and routine phenomenon. It is a mistake moreover to treat power itself as a resource as many theorists of power do. Resources are the media through which power is exercised, and structures of domination reproduced'.<sup>116</sup>

Giddens now is fundamentally on the right track. This is, however, obscured by certain specific features of his argument. First, to say that structure is the 'medium' of action is different from describing it as the 'condition' of action. In practice, Giddens tends towards the first and weaker version. This is brought out, secondly, by his conceiving of structure as consisting of rules and resources. Wittgenstein argues that rules cannot constitute practice, while resources, as Giddens says, can only be thought of as media of action. They only condition action in the weak sense of being necessary

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<sup>114</sup> The fact that the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems.

<sup>115</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems*, pp.69-70. See also Giddens, *The New Rules of Sociological Method* (London, 1976).

<sup>116</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems*, p.91. See S. Lukes, *Power* (London, 1974).

conditions of action, but Giddens's general formula is meant in a stronger causal sense of structures conditioning action. Thirdly, his account of power is confused by the claim that the concepts of transformative capacity and domination are logically connected. The overall effect is a position much closer to methodological individualism than Giddens's general account of structure would suggest. However, there are two great strengths of the theory.<sup>117</sup>

These strengths are, first, the definition of structure as both unacknowledged condition and unanticipated consequence. This encompasses the dimension of structure accepted by proponents of MI<sup>118</sup> but at the same time recognizes what they deny.<sup>119</sup> The second strength of Giddens's account is the way in which he conceptualizes this governing of action by structure. Structures do not simply constrain action. They do not simply act as inert limits, restricting the alternatives open to agents. They are also enabling and are thus present in the actions actually pursued by individuals or groups. This move is possible because of the connection which Giddens establishes between structures and power. 'Power is instantiated in action', but agents' powers cannot be understood without an analysis of structure. The fact that power is instantiated in action is crucial to rendering the claim that structures govern action consistent with the orthodox conception of agency. For action-explanations implicitly contain a premiss to the effect that the agent has the power to do the action believed to be a way of realizing his or her desire. The crucial issue concerns precisely how power and structure are related.

Giddens argues that power should not be identified with structure, or rather with the resources in which structure partially consists. Rather, these resources are the media through which power is exercised. It leaves open the question of the nature of agents' capacities. Now some of these are natural, in the sense that any normal, adult human

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<sup>117</sup> A. Giddens, 'Marx's Correct Views on Everything', *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985).

<sup>118</sup> The unintended consequences of individual actions.

<sup>119</sup> That structures also causally govern actions.

organism will have them. But:

- (1) the exercise of even these natural capacities often depends on agents' position.
- (2) agents in addition have capacities which are derived from their position within the relations of production.

The claim that structures have explanatory autonomy comes down to the assertion that agents' powers are partly dependent on their position in production relations. This thesis need not be formulated in Marxist terms, so long as one accepts that agents' ability to realize their goals is determined to a significant degree by their place in social relations, whether one thinks of these relations as structures, institutions, or whatever. The argument does not depend on any claim about individuals' beliefs being about or shaped by structures. Elster himself emphasizes that 'methodological individualism holds only in extensional contexts... People often have beliefs about supra-individual entities that are not reducible to beliefs about individuals'.<sup>120</sup> MI is about what structures are. It is perfectly consistent with people having (according to MI) false, because collectivist, beliefs about structures. Equally the argument for the ineliminability of structures turns not on people's beliefs about structures but on the powers that they have.<sup>121</sup>

Elster's response would be to argue that structures empower only in so far as they are themselves the properties of individuals. Such the impression conveyed by some highly compressed comments on the claim that 'structures... have causal efficacy', where a structure is a 'set of relations defined in abstraction from the specific relata': 'I disagree.... In extensional contexts, what has causal efficacy is a relation with its relata or, as I put it, individuals with their relations properties.'<sup>122</sup> Elster gives no reasons for this claim that structure conceived as a set of empty places can have no causal efficacy, while a relationship between specific individuals does. Either Elster is ignoring the salient historical truth that human beings usually find themselves in patterned,

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<sup>120</sup> Elster, *Making Sense*, p.6.

<sup>121</sup> They may have without knowing that they have them.

<sup>122</sup> Elster, 'Reply to Comments', *Inquiry*, 29:1 ('986), p.67.

persisting relationships to whose basic character their individual actions can generally make little difference<sup>123</sup> or he is engaged in a purely verbal manoeuvre, calling structures the properties of individuals.<sup>124</sup> Lurking behind Elster's obscure remarks may be the belief that structures<sup>125</sup> must be some sort of mysterious quasi-organic or spiritual entity. A perfectly acceptable definition of structure is provided by Roy Bhaskar conceives structure as 'both the ever present condition (material cause) and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency'.<sup>126</sup> This formulation does not suffer from the sort of ambiguity between cause and medium towards which Giddens tends.

Bhaskar offers the following definition: 'Society... is an articulated ensemble of tendencies and powers which, unlike natural ones, exist only as long as they (or at least some of them) are being exercised; are exercised in the last instance via the intentional activity of men; and are not necessarily space-time invariant'. This definition is intended to encourage us to see society as continuous with nature, which also involves powers and tendencies, but also stresses the peculiarity of social structures. That is, they exist 'only in virtue of [the]... activity' of a certain class of intentional systems, namely human agents.<sup>127</sup>

Quine has taught us to relativize ontology to the sciences, so that what exists is simply those types of objects to which our theories refer. The only question then becomes whether we can reduce one such kind to another.<sup>128</sup> If social structures have explanatory autonomy then they cannot be reduced to individuals and we are stuck with

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<sup>123</sup> In which case it is hard to take him seriously.

<sup>124</sup> In which case he has still to come up with an argument to show that these disguised structures have no causal efficacy.

<sup>125</sup> Where not conceived as the unintended consequences of individual actions.

<sup>126</sup> R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton, 1979), p.43.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.49, 43.

<sup>128</sup> W.V.O. Quine, 'On What There Is', in *From a Logical Point of View* (New York, 1963).

them if we wish to explain social events. Defences of MI degenerate into attempts by philosophers to legislate for social theory.

Any given structure is the consequence of human action is true but that action will itself have taken place under conditions which themselves included structures. Pushing the causal sequence back makes no difference to the question of the explanatory autonomy of structures. Human beings have always lived in social systems which embodied specific structures. But the search for the origins of structure is highly revealing. Gaston Bachelard once said: 'Philosophers believe that by studying origins they can discover creations.' The creation in this case is that of structures by individuals. We have here a case of the 'philosophy of subject'. The conception was first rigorously formulated by Descartes. According to it, the self has epistemological and, in some versions, ontological priority. The Cartesian subject underpins Sartre's metaphysical individualism. It also lurks behind the kind of defence of methodological individualism which rests on the idea that if we push history back far enough we shall find a society without structures.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Rajeev Bhargava in his clarificatory exercise on the substance of the debate between the individualists and the non-individualists comments: 'To many thinkers the basic issue revolves around the allotment of explanatory or causal primacy to individual initiative or external constraints'. But he contends that 'at best this is marginal to the debate'. This is because 'the principal strength of intentionalism (the most plausible of individualist versions) lies in its ability to account for several social entities that have for long fallen within the purview of the non-individualist social science'; *Individualism in Social Science* (Oxford, 1992), p.167.



## CHAPTER III

### REASONS AND INTERESTS

#### **Expressivism and the Hermeneutic Tradition**

The debate between proponents of methodological individualism and functionalism, which was one of my main concerns in the previous chapter, is one variant of a much more fundamental argument over the extent to which the explanation of social events differs from that of natural events. This issue has dominated reflection on the status of social theory for the past century.

The starting-point for this debate is provided by the fact that human action must be interpreted. In order to characterize an action as action one must think of it as performed for reasons whose content can be specified by assigning beliefs and desires to the agent. This irreducible element of interpretation has been seized on by a succession of thinkers who argue that it introduces an essential difference between social theory and the physical sciences. The first to offer a systematic argument to this effect was Wilhelm Dilthey<sup>1</sup> by conceiving the historical world as a text to be deciphered. As Dilthey himself puts it: 'life and history have meaning like the letters of a word.'<sup>2</sup> The reliance of social theory on interpretation was held to be inconsistent with what is usually called the deductive-nomological model of explanation in the physical sciences.<sup>3</sup> This is what Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit call 'nomothetic explanation'.<sup>4</sup> Thus Weber argues that the deductive-nomological model involves 'criteria the satisfaction of which excludes the possibility of an immediately understandable "interpretation" of concrete historical structures', and that, 'phenomenologically "interpretation" simply does not fall under the category of subsumption under generalizations'. And so there arose the contrast between

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<sup>1</sup> Whom Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as justifying the human sciences epistemologically.

<sup>2</sup> H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, 1975), pp.212, 213.

<sup>3</sup> Where an event is explained if and only if it can be deduced from the conjunction of a general law and certain initial conditions.

<sup>4</sup> See C.J. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York, 1965).

the interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*) of human action and the deductive-nomological explanation of physical events.

Jurgen Habermas says, Dilthey tends to think of the role of the interpreter as one of 'empathy, of basically solitary reproduction and re-experiencing' rather than as 'participation in communication learned in interaction'.<sup>5</sup> Weber share this conception of *Verstehen*: ' "Intellectual understanding" includes "inner participation" and therefore "empathy"'.<sup>6</sup>

The historic contribution of Gadamer to the debate is to reject this subjective conception of understanding and instead, following Heidegger, to think of understanding as transcending the distinction between subject and object, 'the original character of the being of human life itself'. And because *Dasein* necessarily involves both a relationship to others and to past and future, 'understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but of the placing oneself within a process of tradition in which past and present are constantly fused.' The objectivity of understanding is provided by the fact that it is a relation to tradition. It does not consist in merely the mechanical transmission of past thought. It is active, transformative within the context of our own purposes. So that 'understanding... is always the fusion of [the]... horizons' of past and present. This encounter can only occur in language, the 'central point where "I" and the world meet or, rather, manifest their original unity'.<sup>7</sup>

Gadamer thus embeds methodological anti-naturalism in the hermeneutic tradition. Charles Taylor describes it as 'the triple-H theory' because it originated in the Romantic philosophy of language developed by Herder and Humboldt and was continued in a different form by Heidegger. Taylor argues that this conception involves the doctrine of 'expressivism'. It implies that the 'representative function' of language by means of which our utterances refer to objects is not its most fundamental dimension. Rather, reference presupposes the 'expressive dimension' of language which has three aspects.

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<sup>5</sup> See J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest* (London, 1972), p.180.

<sup>6</sup> See also *ibid.*, pp.177-86; and Gadamer, *Truth*, pp.193ff.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, *Truth*, pp.230, 258, 273, 431.

First, 'through language we can bring to explicit awareness what we formerly had only an implicit sense of.' Secondly, 'language enables us to put things in public space.' Thirdly, it 'provides the medium through which some of our most important concerns, the characteristically human concerns, can impinge on us all'. All three are different ways of 'disclosure, of making things plain.'<sup>8</sup>

What is disclosed by language expressively used is the context of speech: 'This context is made up both of the horizon of concerns which is further articulated by the term in question, and also by the practices connected with them. The practices are an inseparable part of the horizon, not only because the concerns will have to do with certain practices... but also because some concerns are most fully expressed in social practices and institutions, those precisely which lack some explicit articulation of the values involved'.

Therefore, language is fundamentally 'a pattern of activity, by which we express/realize a certain way of being in the world, that of reflective awareness, but a pattern which can only be deployed against a background which we can never fully dominate, and yet a background that we are never fully dominated by, because we are constantly reshaping it.'<sup>9</sup>

The nub of expressivism is that language cannot be separated from that which is expressed in it. As Gadamer puts it, 'to be expressed in language does not mean that a second being is acquired. The way in which a thing presents itself is, rather, part of its own being.'<sup>10</sup> The hermeneutic view of language has major implications for social theory. These are spelled out by Hubert Dreyfus. He argues that the 'inherited background of practices cannot be spelled out in a theory' because 'what makes up the background is not beliefs, either explicit or implicit, but habits or customs, embodied in the sort of subtle skills which we exhibit in our everyday interaction with things and people.' If social theory models itself on the physical sciences ignoring this background,

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<sup>8</sup> C. Taylor, *Philosophical Papers* (2 Vols, Cambridge, 1985), I, pp.255-6, 256-7, 259, 260, 269.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.280, 232.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, *Truth*, p.432.

then it leaves out of account 'the unique feature of human behaviour, the human self-interpretation embodied in our everyday know-how (Vorhabe)'.<sup>11</sup>

### Interpretation and Social Theory

Anthony Giddens argues that understanding is 'the very ontological condition of human life in society as such'. Any purely interpretive sociology fails, however, to take into account the intrinsic connection between human action and power and the dependence of the latter on the resources which Giddens regards as constitutive of structure. He therefore advocates a 'hermeneutically informed social theory'. One that does not eschew structural analysis, but which also makes irreducible reference to 'practical consciousness'. That is, to 'tacit knowledge that is skilfully employed in the enactment of courses of conduct, but which the actor is not able to formulate discursively'.<sup>12</sup>

Runciman's thesis is that 'there is no special problem of explanation in the human sciences, only a special problem of description'. He distinguishes between four main tasks of social theory - reportage, explanation, description and evaluation. They consist in answering the questions 'what?', 'why?', 'what like?' and 'how good or bad?' respectively. To report an action is simply to characterize it as a specific action by ascribing beliefs and intentions to the person performing it. To explain it is to establish a causal connection between some other event and the explanandum, which is itself an instance of a relationship accounted for by a set of broader sociological generalizations. To evaluate it is to pass moral judgement on the action. All three are distinct from one another. Reportage and explanation in principle share the logical structure of their counterparts in the physical sciences. Description, however, is unique to social theory. To describe an action in this sense is 'to understand... what it was like to do it'. Its role is 'to bridge a presumptive divide between the culture of those whose thoughts, words

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<sup>11</sup> H. Dreyfus, 'Holism and Hermeneutics', *Review of Metaphysics*, LXXXIV, 1:33 (1980), pp.7, 6, 17.

<sup>12</sup> A. Giddens, *The New Rules of Sociological Method* (London, 1976), p.19; A. Giddens, *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* (London, 1982), pp.5, 31.

or deeds are being described and that of the presumptive reader and/or the sociologist himself'. The worth of a description must be judged by 'the responses of those whose experiences have been described'. However, it 'necessarily involves more than the mere repetition of what "they" say about their experiences', and so consists in 'reinterpreting the meaning to "them" of the experiences so described'. Descriptions are not so much true or false as 'authentic' or 'inauthentic'. Description, however, is in principle an infinite process, in which authentic redescriptions of the same experience are not mutually incompatible but rather complement one another.<sup>13</sup>

Runciman's account of description captures an important feature of social theory. It is often noted how anthropologists seek to understand an alien culture and to characterize the way in which the world is experienced by members of that culture. But much the same is often true of historians. Some of the most memorable pieces of historical writing do not so much either tell a story or explain events but show what it was like to be a member of a particular society, to live at a certain time, to be present on some occasion. Runciman says that 'description in sociology calls for an exercise of imagination on the sociologist's part, which is not involved in reportage or explanation or, therefore, in the practice of natural science at all.'<sup>14</sup> Some historical writing does have a distinctly literary character. This is not so much a matter of style as of the nature of what is being done. Art invites us to experience the world in a particular way. So too does social theory when it attempts to answer the question 'what like?'

At the same time, Runciman does not reduce social theory to the imaginative reconstruction of how particular actors experience the world. Rather: 'Explanatory, descriptive and evaluative sociology, however closely combined in practice, are always distinguishable in principle.'<sup>15</sup> The idea is to characterize the distinctiveness of social theory in such a way as to allow full scope for explanation in the same sense as in the physical sciences. The difficulties which Runciman's account of the methodology of

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<sup>13</sup> W.G. Runciman, *A Treatise on Social Theory*, I (Cambridge, 1983), pp.1, 15, 20, 294, 226-7, 236, 295.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.267-8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

social theory runs into, however, concern not so much description as explanation and reportage.

The first difficulty arises from an important disanalogy between the explanation of social and physical events. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that 'the salient fact' about social theory is 'the absence of the discovery of any lawlike generalizations'. Such generalizations as do exist 'coexist... with recognized counter-examples... lack not only universal quantifiers but scope modifiers', and 'do not entail any well-defined set of counterfactual conditionals', differing fundamentally in all these respects from scientific laws in the deductive-nomological model. MacIntyre identifies 'four sources of unpredictability in human affairs'. First, no discovery can be predicted since any such prediction would involve possession of the concept in whose elaboration the discovery consists. Secondly, I cannot predict action which depends in part on a course of action of my own on which I have yet to decide. Thirdly, 'the game-theoretic character of social life' introduces uncertainties arising from the interdependence of actors' decisions. Fourthly, there is 'pure contingency', the accidents which may have a large bearing on events, such as the length of Cleopatra's nose.<sup>16</sup>

These sources of unpredictability<sup>17</sup> arise from the fact that society exists only in virtue of the intentional activity of human agents. This fact is also crucial to Roy Bhaskar's discussion of social generalizations. Bhaskar argues that causal laws identify mechanisms which in certain conditions give rise to certain sequences of events.<sup>18</sup> These conditions do not, however, typically exist in nature. Rather, what we have is an 'open system', in which the interaction of underlying mechanisms produces the rather chaotic flux of events which we experience. Human intervention is necessary in order to create a 'closed system', i.e. one in which the conditions specified by the causal law are met, and one can therefore establish experimentally whether the constant conjunction predicted by the law actually occurs. Experimentation in the physical sciences typically

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<sup>16</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London, 1981), pp.84, 86-7, 89-95.

<sup>17</sup> With the partial exception of the fourth since natural events such as earthquakes count as cases of 'pure contingency'.

<sup>18</sup> The constant conjunctions with which Humeans identify causal laws.

involves interfering in nature in order to set up the conditions which allow us to test proposed causal laws.<sup>19</sup>

Things go differently in social theory, however. Because of the dependence of social structures on intentional activity, 'social systems are not spontaneously, and cannot be experimentally closed.' Bhaskar does not believe, however, that this makes the explanation of social events impossible: 'The real methodological import of the absence of closed systems is strictly limited: it is that the social sciences are denied, in principle, decisive test-situations for their theories. This means that criteria for the rational development and replacement of theories in social science must be explanatory and non-predictive.'<sup>20</sup>

Bhaskar's analysis is illuminating. It captures the peculiarity of social generalizations. This is not that it is always open to the investigator, rather than to abandon a hypothesis in the face of refuting evidence, to explain away the evidence. The same move is available to physical scientists and is perfectly legitimate so long as the explanation is itself independently testable. The difficulty is rather the way in which social generalizations seem able to coexist indefinitely with recognized counter-examples. This is a situation which reflects the impossibility of establishing conditions where one remove the interference of those factors<sup>21</sup> which are responsible for the counter-example.

The question then arises of how such generalizations can be tested, if at all. Runciman suggests that 'the mode of reasoning most appropriate to sociological explanation is neither deductive-nomological nor inductive-statistical but quasi-experimental; and if, accordingly, there is a directive to be framed it is to the effect that practising sociologists should normally be looking neither for regularities nor for probabilities but for suggestive contrasts - suggestive, that is, in that they may either test or extend a theory which has application over as much as possible of the range of events,

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<sup>19</sup> R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Hassocks, 1975), passim.

<sup>20</sup> R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton, 1979), pp.57, 58.

<sup>21</sup> Exponents of the generalization in question typically argue.

processes or states of affairs which have been chosen for study'.<sup>22</sup>

The precise import of this methodological injunction to search for 'suggestive contrasts' is not made wholly clear. The difficulty does not lie so much with the adjective 'suggestive' -Runciman has in mind the inability of social generalizations to deal decisively with counter-examples. The problem is rather the following: is the search for contrasts to guide the construction or the corroboration of our hypotheses? If it is the latter, then the comparison of different cases acts primarily as an empirical control on the generalization. An example might be Robert Brenner's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism: he claims that the decisive variable in determining whether or not agrarian capitalism was likely to develop lay in the relative strengths of the two main feudal classes, the lords and the peasants. This claim is then put to the test by comparing the trajectories of English and French feudalism. Brenner argues that it was the relative weakness of the English peasantry which allowed the lords to establish absolute property in land and gradually to introduce capitalist relations based on wage-labour. The strength of their French counterparts left them with access to their means of livelihood. This led to a very different resolution of the crisis of late-medieval feudalism, namely the centralization of lordly power in the absolute monarchy.<sup>23</sup>

If, however, our social generalizations are themselves to embody 'suggestive contrasts', then we are likely to be predisposed towards comparative sociology. That is, to a form of social theory which 'appeals either to the performance of similar functions by institutions dissimilar in structure or to the performance by institutions similar in structure of dissimilar functions'. Runciman argues that 'Anderson's account of social evolution remains too closely constrained within a narrative framework', so that 'societies evolve... out of a process of internal contradictions and external pressures, and the way in which this comes about is analysed diachronically, case by case.' In fact, Runciman suggests, Anderson's genealogy of the modern state is better understood within a comparative framework, where societies involve differential combinations of invariant

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<sup>22</sup> Runciman, *Treatise*, p.168.

<sup>23</sup> See R. Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe', *Past and Present*, 70 (1976).



structures and functions.<sup>24</sup> This is, in effect, an argument against historical materialism tout court, since Marxism generally accounts for the development and transformation of social formations in terms of 'internal contradictions and external pressures'. But such a substantive claim could not be derived from purely methodological considerations. Its effect would be to subordinate history to social theory rather than to unite the two. This is Runciman's aim. It is implied by such remarks as 'sociology... can best be regarded as psychology plus social history' and social 'explanation is typically by reference to psychological dispositions'.<sup>25</sup> Social theory is to concern itself on this view with the manifestations of an invariant human nature and of the social structures and functions to which it gives rise.

The conclusion is not that we should reject Runciman's proposal that social theory should search for suggestive contrasts but that we should interpret it as a procedure for corroborating hypotheses rather than as a view about their substance. This is not to reverse Runciman's preference and rule out comparative explanations. It is, however, also to admit explanations which make reference to the structural properties of modes of production.<sup>26</sup>

The second and more fundamental difficulty with Runciman's proposed methodology lies in his account of reportage. To report an action is to ascribe a mental state to the actor, as is clear from the following: 'to specify an action in the ordinary way is to account for the bodily movements which, together with both the agent's intention and such features of the social context as are relevant, make the action what it is.' Reportage, Runciman claims, involves no presuppositions about the agent's rationality: 'At the level of primary understanding [i.e. reportage], behaviour is neither rational nor irrational as such.' Reportage is logically distinct from explanation, description and

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<sup>24</sup> Anderson himself has criticized the 'theoretical fallacy... that there cannot be a sociology at once historical and comparative', and defended 'real comparisons' as 'indispensable' empirical controls': 'Those in Authority', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 December 1986.

<sup>25</sup> Runciman, *Treatise*, pp.32, 150.

<sup>26</sup> That is, of distinct kinds of social systems, in the way in which Anderson does in his structural history of European state-forms.

evaluation, providing in particular a means of characterizing social events which is neutral between rival explanations.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to specify this property of reportage.<sup>28</sup> His claim is the weaker one, that the report is independent of the theories offered to account for the explanandum captured by the report. Nevertheless, the notion of reportage seems vulnerable to the following difficulty.

Runciman says that typically 'the intentions and beliefs of the agents themselves as they are reported by themselves' form a court of appeal by means of which to settle disputes over how to report a given action.<sup>29</sup> This brings out the basic thesis of the hermeneutic tradition. That is, understanding social action involves interpreting the agent's speech. This is not a simple task, for the reason given by Donald Davidson: 'A central source of trouble is the way beliefs and meanings conspire to account for utterances. A speaker who holds a sentence to be true on an occasion does so in part because of what he means, or would mean, by an utterance of that sentence, and in part because of what he believes. If all we have to go on is the fact of honest utterance, we cannot infer the belief within having the meaning, and have no chance of inferring the meaning without the belief'.<sup>30</sup>

One way out of the circle might seem to be to try to match an alien speaker's sayings with the observed context of their utterances. This attempt founders on the problem of the indeterminacy of translation set out by Quine. The problem is twofold. First, say we try to isolate a subset of the alien language consisting of 'observation sentences', i.e. those sentences on which all speakers of the language will pass the same verdict (of assent or dissent) when subjected to the same physical stimulation. This might

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<sup>27</sup> Runciman, *Treatise*, pp.27, 22, 95.

<sup>28</sup> The aim is to construct reports that do not prejudge the question of which is the best explanation of the event reported, because one might otherwise think that Runciman is suggesting that observational statements (of which reports are a subset) are independent of all theory.

<sup>29</sup> Runciman, *Treatise*, p.85.

<sup>30</sup> D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984), p.142.

seem to give us a secure empirical base. But it does not: for there is no single way in which an observation can be reported. All sentences, observation sentences as well as the most refined theories, are underdetermined by the evidence for them. So, relative to the physical stimulus associated with the alien's observation sentence, there will be more than one way of translating the sentence into our own language. Secondly, there is the question of the entities referred to by the terms composing alien sentences. We might think that if an alien utters 'Gavagai' while pointing to a rabbit, we can safely translate 'Gavagai' as 'rabbit'. We would again be wrong. For the way in which terms pick out entities depends on the specific grammatical apparatus of a language and we know nothing about how the alien language works. 'Gavagai' might mean 'rabbit-stage', 'rabbit-part', or even 'rabbit-hood' for all we know. This doctrine<sup>31</sup> implies that there is more than one way of translating sentences containing 'Gavagai'.<sup>32</sup>

Davidson's contribution to the philosophy of language has been in large part to offer a way out of the indeterminacy of translation, but one which shares with Quine the idea that 'the theory for which we should ultimately strive is one that takes as evidential basis preferences between sentences - preferences that one sentence rather than another be true. The theory would then explain individual sentences of this sort by attributing beliefs and values to the agent, and meanings to his words.'

Davidson begins to do this by adopting the 'Principle of Charity': 'I propose that we take the fact that speakers of a language hold a sentence to be true (under observed circumstances) as prima facie evidence that the sentence is true under those circumstances.'<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The 'inscrutability of reference'.

<sup>32</sup> See W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), Ch. 1; and 'on the Reasons for Indeterminacy of Translation', *Journal of Philosophy*, LXIII (1970). On the underdetermination of all sentences by observation see, for example, K.R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1968), ch. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries*, pp. 148, 152.

He agrees with Quine's arguments about indeterminacy: See, for example, 'The Inscrutability of Reference', *ibid.*

Davidson characterizes this approach thus: 'This method is intended to solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning. This is accomplished by assigning truth-conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right. What justifies the procedure is the fact that disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement.'<sup>34</sup>

As Quine observes, 'Davidson proposed that the speaker is always right, in order to separate belief from meaning, until we have enough of a system so that we can start including error.'

At the same time, Davidson emphasizes that the Principle of Charity is not a falsifiable empirical hypothesis: 'If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.'<sup>35</sup> If Davidson is right, then reportage is not the unproblematic practice which Runciman thinks it is. The possibility of interpretation presupposes a substantive theory of rationality.

### **Charity, Truth and Community**

Davidson introduces the Principle of Charity as part of a much broader philosophy of language. The link is provided by the claim that 'all understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation.' That is, the problems of indeterminacy of translation and inscrutability of reference arise even where we seek to interpret the utterances of other speakers of the same language. This makes the strategy of radical interpretation an aspect of a more general theory of meaning conceived as the attempt to explain how it is that speakers understand an indefinite number of unfamiliar sentences. Davidson proposes that we regard the sense of a sentence as consisting in its truth-

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<sup>34</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries*, p.137.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137.

conditions. He adopts Tarski's semantic conception of truth, according to which 'p' is true if and only if p. The sentence 'p' figures twice in this truth-sentence: it is first mentioned and then used in order to state its truth-conditions. The apparent triviality of this definition is removed once we appreciate that Tarski explains truth in terms of the more fundamental semantic concept of 'satisfaction', the relationship between predicates and the sequences of objects of which they are true. To give a Tarskian theory of truth for a natural language is to reveal its structure by showing how the basic expressions of the language figure in a potentially infinite number of sentences. What such a truth-theory does not do, however, is determine the meaning of individual sentences. Tarski himself simply takes for granted that 'p' and p are identical in meaning, and use this synonymy in defining truth. Davidson, however, wants to use truth in order to characterize meaning. It is here that radical interpretation comes in. For the Principle of Charity provides us with a means of giving the meaning of particular sentences by relating speaker's willingness to assent or dissent from them to specific features of the world, judged in the light of what we the interpreters hold true. We thus have an empirical constraint allowing us to match up the speaker's beliefs and utterances. The principle also underlines that a language can only be understood holistically, since it gives a procedure for interpreting sentences which involves attributing to the speaker a system of beliefs.<sup>36</sup>

Davidson's theory of meaning can be called realist in two senses. First, it bases meaning on a version of the classical conception of truth, according to which our sentences are true or false in virtue of the state of the world. Davidson writes: The semantic conception of truth developed by Tarski deserves to be called a correspondence theory because of the part played by the concept of satisfaction; for clearly what has been done is that the property of being true has been explained, and non-trivially, in terms of a relation between language and something else.'

Secondly, Davidson's conception of radical interpretation is realist in the sense that the Principle of Charity involves 'reference to the objective features of the world

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<sup>36</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries*, p.125. See A. Tarski, 'The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages', in A. Tarski, *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics* (Oxford, 1969).

which alter in conjunction with changes in attitude towards the truth of sentences'.<sup>37</sup> Davidson's work has been at the heart of contemporary debates among analytical philosophers of language, many of whom (most notably Michael Dummett) object to identifying the sense of a sentence with its truth-conditions, since it may be impossible for speakers to establish whether or not these conditions are met. The ensuing debate between realists and 'anti-realists' is, however, less relevant from our point of view than two other criticisms.

The first is directed to the very notion of radical interpretation itself. Taylor attacks 'Quine's notion [shared by Davidson] that any understanding of one person's language by another is the application of a theory'. Radical interpretation involves conceiving understanding as a relationship between a detached observer and an independent reality: Now this may work for the domain of middle-size dry goods, the ordinary material objects that surround us, and are likely to be salient both to observer and native, in virtue of their similarity as human beings. Perhaps depictions of these can be understood by offering truth-conditional formulae in our language.

But when it comes to our emotions, aspirations, goals, our social relations and practices, this cannot be. The reason is that they are already partly constituted by language, and you have to understand this language to understand them.<sup>38</sup>

Behind this argument is, I think, the fundamentally Wittgensteinian idea that one learns a language as part of a community of speakers where correct usage is determined by the shared practices of speakers. As Dummett puts it, 'to take the social character of language seriously is to recognize that, in using the language, a speaker intended to be taken as responsible to, and only to, those linguistic practices agreed on by all members of the linguistic community.' It follows that 'the linguistic dispositions peculiar to a single speaker do not have, even for him, the same status as do those accepted by all

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<sup>37</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries*, pp. 48, 136, note 16.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, *Papers, II*, pp.281, 275.

speakers.<sup>39</sup> Understanding another speaker of the same language does not consist in constructing a theory about the meaning of his utterances in the light of the Principle of Charity but rather depends on our sharing the same linguistic practices. The problem of radical interpretation may arise when we are trying to interpret the utterances of an alien speaker but even then, Taylor seems to imply, interpretation is only likely to succeed through our making ourselves part of the community of alien speakers.

At one level the argument is well taken. It does seem wrong to assimilate understanding one's native language to interpreting a foreign language and some of those influenced by Davidson have conceded this point.<sup>40</sup> But the problem posed by Quine remains: how can we come to understand the utterances of an alien speaker? If Davidsonian radical interpretation errs in treating this problem as definitive of understanding tout court, Taylor and the hermeneutic tradition generally seem to commit the reverse error, that of reducing interlinguistic understanding to the understanding of a language by a native speaker. Thus Gadamer treats interpretation as a relation to tradition, which is both continued and transformed in being appropriated. But this 'fusion of horizons' assumes the existence of a persisting shared culture which unites both the living members of that culture and previous generations. But how does understanding occur when no such culture exists? The problem does not arise simply in the case of interpreting an alien speaker. It may also arise for the historian studying a society different in fundamental respects from his or her own. The hermeneutic tradition condemns us in these cases to a sort of linguistic solipsism, in which members of different cultures confront one another in a relation of mutual incomprehension. Taylor does not deny that we can understand an alien language but he offers no account of how this is possible.

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<sup>39</sup> M.A.E. Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London, 1978), p.403. See also H.Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning",' in H.Putnam, *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge, 1975); and S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Oxford, 1982).

<sup>40</sup> See J. McDowell, 'Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding', in H.Parret and J. Bourveresse eds., *Meaning and Understanding* (Berlin, 1981), pp.239-40.

It is in this light that we can appreciate the importance of the Principle of charity since it offers us a procedure by means of which to interpret the utterances of an alien speaker. The second criticism of Davidson concerns this principle. Davidson has two arguments for trying to maximize agreement between the alien and ourselves. The first is that to do otherwise is to treat the alien as irrational. The second that assuming that the bulk of his beliefs are true provides a basis for then interpreting his utterances. But, as Colin McGinn observes, the second argument will be satisfied just as well if we assume systematic falsity rather than truth, while 'you appreciate the reasonableness of an action by putting yourself into its agent's shoes, not by forcing him into yours.'<sup>41</sup> Considerations of this kind have led to a refinement of the Principle of Charity, the Principle of Humanity which says that the interpreter should not so much maximize agreement, whatever the cost, as minimize a certain sort of disagreement which we find unintelligible. Where charity would have us recoil from the ascription of any disagreement or, as we are going to see it, error, humanity would only have us do so when we cannot explain how such disagreement or error could have come about.<sup>42</sup> The Principle of Humanity involves the notion of a common human nature. David Wiggins argues that 'one must take into account not only what the world presents to the experience of subjects but also their interests and their focus on the world. How else can we guess what the world presents to them?... But then we can only break out of the circle of belief, affect and meaning if, in advance of any particular problem of radical interpretation, we think we know more than nothing not only about the world but also about men in general.'<sup>43</sup>

Wiggins elaborates on how the notion of human nature enters into radical interpretation: 'Presented with the human form we entertain immediately a multitude of

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<sup>41</sup> C. McGinn, 'Charity, Interpretation and Belief', *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIV, 9 (1977), pp.522-3.

<sup>42</sup> G. Macdonald and P. Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London, 1981), pp.29-30. See also R. Grandy, 'Reference, Meaning and Belief', *Journal of Philosophy*, LXX, 14 (1973).

<sup>43</sup> D. Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, 1980), p.222.



however tentative expectations. We interpret the speech and conduct of the remotest human strangers in the light of the maxim that we should interpret them in such a way as to ascribe beliefs, needs and concerns to them that will diminish to the minimum the need to postulate *inexplicable* disagreement between us and them. We entertain the idea, unless we are irremediably conceited or colonialist in mentality, that there may be something we ourselves can learn from strangers about the true, the good and the rational.... In the absence of a belief in such a thing as human nature, I do not think that there is any idea of inexplicable error or disagreement that is available to us.’<sup>44</sup>

This way of thinking about interpretation has a number of important implications. In the first place, it allows us to avoid the relativism which is inherent in the hermeneutic conception of understanding. According to the Principle of Humanity, what makes understanding possible is not a background of practices which can never be fully articulated by a theory, but rather simply our common nature. Wittgenstein says: ‘It is essential for communication that we agree in a large number of judgements.’<sup>45</sup> But this agreement springs from the contingent fact that human beings share certain fundamental characteristics. As Wittgenstein puts it, ‘the common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.’ Without such a reference point, springing from human beings’ shared nature, there is no guarantee that communication is possible. Indeed ‘if a lion could talk, we could not understand him.’<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, Davidson’s conception of interpretation is realist in the sense that it starts from human sayings and doings in an objective world. This makes it preferable in fundamental respects to the account of understanding offered by Jurgen Habermas. Habermas sees his theory of communicative action as basic to a more general theory of rationality. It allows him to avoid the scepticism and pessimism of the early Frankfurt school - which by the 1940s had come to see reason itself as an instrument of domination

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<sup>44</sup> D. Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, 1980), pp.222-3.

<sup>45</sup> L.Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Oxford, 1978), Pt.VI, 39.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1968), Pt.I, 206; Pt.II.xi.

- and the similar attitudes expressed by contemporary 'post-modernism' (Lyotard, Foucault, German neo-conservatives).<sup>47</sup>

Habermas argues that 'reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech.' But this implies a certain analysis of utterances.<sup>48</sup> Specifically, 'only those speech acts with which a speaker connects a criticizable validity-claim can move a hearer to accept an offer independently of external force.' Therefore, 'a speaker can *rationaly motivate* a hearer to accept his speech-act offer because ... he can assume the *warranty* for providing, if necessary, convincing reasons that would stand up to a hearer's criticism of the validity-claim.'<sup>49</sup>

Habermas elaborates what is involved in the idea that a speaker implicitly undertakes 'to redeem, if necessary, the validity-claim raised with his speech-act': 'When a hearer accepts a speech-act, an agreement comes about between at least two acting and speaking subjects. However, this does not rest only on the intersubjective recognition of a single thematically stressed validity-claim. Rather, an agreement of this sort is achieved simultaneously at three levels. We can identify these intuitively if we keep in mind that in communicative action a speaker selects a comprehensive linguistic expression only in order to come to an understanding *with* a hearer *about* something and thereby to make *himself* understandable. It belongs to the communicative intent of the speaker (a) that he perform a speech-act that is *right* with respect to the given normative context, so that between him and the hearer an intersubjective relation will come about which is recognized as legitimate; (b) that he make a *true* (or *correct*) existential presupposition, so that the hearer will accept and share the knowledge of the speaker; and (c) that he express *truthfully* his beliefs, intentions, desires, and the like, so that the hearer will give credence to what is said.'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See R. Bernstein ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge, 1985); and J. Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity* (London, 1986).

<sup>48</sup> Or, as Habermas calls them following J.L. Austin and John Searle, speech-acts.

<sup>49</sup> J. Habermas, *A Theory of Communicative Action*, I (London, 1984), pp.287, 305, 302.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.302, 307-8.

This analysis of the presuppositions of communicative action confirms his claim that the aspiration to a rational society is implicit in our speech: 'What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we know: *language*. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unrestrained consensus.' Since such a consensus could only exist in an emancipated society, 'the truth of statements is based on anticipating the good life.'<sup>51</sup>

Habermas has an odd conception of understanding. It consists in the hearer's 'accepting' the speaker's 'offer' of a speech-act, resulting in an agreement between the two. 'The normative validity-claim is itself cognitive in the sense of the supposition (however counterfactual) that it could be discursively redeemed-that is, grounded in consensus of the participants through argumentation.'<sup>52</sup>

Understanding is the telos of the speech-act (here a moral judgement) in the sense of what would arise in an 'ideal speech situation' where discussion was motivated purely by the search for the truth. And truth itself seems to be identified with an ideal consensus, following Peirce's claim that 'the conception of reality ... essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. And so those two series of cognition - the real and the unreal - consist of those which, at a time sufficiently future, the community will always continue to reaffirm; and of those which, under the same conditions, will ever be denied.'<sup>53</sup>

But such an identification of truth with ideal consensus is incoherent. For it is always possible, even 'at a time sufficiently future', to ask whether or not those sentences which 'the community ... continues[s] to reaffirm' are true. 'True' does not mean 'warrantably assertible', however far into the future we project ourselves. It is

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<sup>51</sup> Habermas, *Knowledge*, p.314. See also J.Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (London,1979).

<sup>52</sup> J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (London, 1976), p.105.

<sup>53</sup> *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), 5. 311.

precisely the objectivity of truth<sup>54</sup> which allows it to act as a regulative ideal for science. It requires us to revise the sentences we hold true when they clash with evidence.<sup>55</sup>

These difficulties aside, Habermas's account of understanding implies that we can choose whether or not to understand an utterance. This is suggested by the idea that the hearer 'accepts' the speaker's 'offer'. This view is drastically at odds with what happens in speech. No one who understands a given language can avoid understanding what is said in his or her presence in that language even if it is not addressed to him or her. The case of inattention is not a counter-example since this consists in, voluntarily or involuntarily, not listening to what is said, treating it as background noise. But, if we attend, we understand.<sup>56</sup>

Underlying this very peculiar treatment of understanding is what Michael Rosen calls a 'conventionalist' conception of language. According to it a set of tacit presuppositions<sup>57</sup> is necessary for anything to be said.<sup>58</sup> Such a view of language is at odds with Wittgenstein's discussion of meaning and rule-following in the *Philosophical Investigations*, summarized by Colin McGinn thus: 'Understanding is not an inner process of supplying an interpretation of a sign which justifies one in reacting to the sign in a certain way; it is, rather, an ability to engage in a practice or custom of using a sign over time in accordance with one's natural propensities.'

Thus viewing language as 'a form of natural behaviour', McGinn notes, 'is not incompatible with recognizing that language is in some sense 'conventional'. It is true

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<sup>54</sup> Its consisting in a relation between our sentences and the world independently of our ability to identify those sentences to which the predicate 'true' applies.

<sup>55</sup> See K.R. Popper, *Realism and the Aim of Science* (London, 1982).

<sup>56</sup> Though the use of unfamiliar jargon by the speaker may obscure certain parts of his or her speech.

<sup>57</sup> Involving, in this case, certain commitments on the part of the speaker to the hearer.

<sup>58</sup> M. Rosen, 'Critical Theory: the Persistence of Philosophy', in S. Mitchell and M. Rosen eds., *The Need for Interpretation* (London, 1982).

(in some sense) that words mean what they do in virtue of the conventional relations between them and the world; but this does not imply that our nature makes no contribution to what we mean - indeed, one might well hold that our conventions are *underlain* by our nature.<sup>59</sup>

Davidson takes a similarly anti-conventionalist view of language. He argues that 'language is a condition for having conventions', rather than the reverse.<sup>60</sup> Rather than to seek to identify the tacit presuppositions of speech which make it possible, the Davidsonian theory of interpretation claims that understanding depends simply on the fact that human beings share a common nature and live in the same world. We can interpret the utterances of an alien speaker, not because we implicitly posit an ideal speech situation in which the aspirations of German classical idealism towards freedom and reason are somehow realized, but because, in Wiggins's words, 'we know more than nothing not only about the world but also about men in general' and that by virtue of the fact that we are ourselves men and women in that world.

There is one respect in which the Habermasian and Davidsonian conceptions of understanding are at one. Each involves a theory of rationality. In the Davidsonian case it arises by virtue of the fact that interpretation involves ascribing beliefs to agents. As Macdonald and Pettit put it, 'Beliefs, like their propositional objects, are capable of being true or false and it would make no sense to ascribe beliefs to an agent without assuming that he was disposed to make moves appropriate to ensure that his beliefs were true. To assume this is to take it that the agent is attitudinally rational, where to make his utterances and actions as the rational issue of beliefs and desires was to assume behavioural rationality.'<sup>61</sup>

It is in this sense that the truth of the orthodox conception of agents is a precondition of interpretation. Unless we assume that in this minimal sense agents are rational, their doings and sayings are unintelligible. The orthodox conception can

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<sup>59</sup> C. McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Oxford, 1984), p.42.

<sup>60</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries*, p.280.

<sup>61</sup> Macdonald and Pettit, *Semantics*, p.12.

therefore be said to be implied by the Principle of Humanity. We could treat this as a transcendental argument for the orthodox conception, as I suggested in chapter 1. But the preceding discussion has underlined the dependence of the orthodox conception on a broader conception of human nature, to which the Principle of Humanity makes tacit appeal. In any case, the fact that the best available theory of interpretation issues in the orthodox conception of agents<sup>62</sup> removes the threat that the indispensability of interpretation rules out generalizing social theory. Let us consider ways of giving more content to the assumption that agents are rational.

### The Utilitarian Theory of Action

Consider utilitarianism, not as an ethical theory but as an account of human action. As such it has, Talcott Parsons suggests, four main characteristics: ‘atomism, rationality, empiricism and randomness of ends’. Agents are conceived as being individual human organisms seeking to satisfy their wants. Rationality is understood as what Weber calls *Zweckrationalitat*, characterized by the optimizing principle. ‘Action is rational in so far as it pursues ends possible within the conditions of the situation, and by the means which, among those available to the actor, are intrinsically best adapted to the end for reasons understandable and verifiable by positive empirical science.’ Parsons notes that ‘there is nothing in the theory dealing with the relations of the ends to each other, but only with the character of the means-end relationship.’ Actions are instrumentally rational, in that they are the means best adapted to a given end. The givenness of ends, Parsons argues, implies ‘the randomness of the ends, at least the ultimate ends, of actions’.<sup>63</sup>

The utilitarian theory of action has had an enormous influence on modern social theory. The various forms of rational-choice theory<sup>64</sup> are essentially formalizations of

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<sup>62</sup> Which we have already seen in chapters 1 and 2 to be consistent with explanations of social events whose premisses mention structures.

<sup>63</sup> T. Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (2 vols, New York, 1968), I, pp.60, 58, 59, 60.

<sup>64</sup> Such as neo-classical economics, game theory and public-choice theory.

its assumptions, so that agents are thought of as having an ordered and consistent set of preferences and of choosing that which will maximize utility for them as defined by these preferences. For rational-choice Marxists such as John Roemer utilitarianism thus formalized is an immensely powerful means for transforming historical materialism into a deductive theory whose laws are proven theorems.<sup>65</sup> Equally there are those for whom the identification of rationality with optimization is profoundly problematic. Both Weber and the early Frankfurt school regard modern civilization as the triumph of instrumental reason. It is a state of affairs which render the attainment of any substantive rationality impossible and which makes reason into the instrument of domination.<sup>66</sup>

Parsons thought that historical materialism involves the utilitarian theory of action. He describes Marxism as 'a version of utilitarian individualism'.<sup>67</sup> This claim has been elaborated in a most interesting article by David Lockwood. He argues that Marx went beyond classical utilitarianism chiefly in introducing the notion of 'differential class rationality'. Capitalists are still thought of as *zweckrational*. Workers, however, possess "reason", in the sense of a capacity to understand that [instrumentally] rational action ... can be self defeating'. Further, 'it is ... through its exercise, under conditions created by capitalist [*sic*] accumulation, that the end-shift of the proletariat [i.e. their decision to overthrow capitalism and abolish class society] occurs.'<sup>68</sup>

Marx's reformulation of the concept of rationality still fails to distinguish between two different forms of deviation from rational action. The first is 'irrational action', 'an integral part of utilitarian thinking', which is 'seen to be due either to the actor's inadequate knowledge of the facts of the situation, or to his imperfect understanding of

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<sup>65</sup> J. Roemer, ' "Rational-Choice' Marxism', in J. Roemer ed., *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge, 1986).

<sup>66</sup> See Habermas, *Theory*, passim.

<sup>67</sup> Parsons, *Structure*, I, p.110. See also M. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), pp.102-10.

<sup>68</sup> D. Lockwood, 'The Weakest Link in the Chain? Some Comments on the Marxist Theory of Action', in R.L. and I.H. Simpson eds., *Research in the Sociology of Work*, I (Greenwich, CT, 1981), p.437.

the most efficient, that is, scientifically rational means of attaining his ends'. The second Lockwood calls '*nonrational action*'. This is 'defined positively by the actor's conformity to rules or norms that he regards as obligatory because they embody some ultimate end or value'. Marxism suffers from 'the lack of a clear distinction between irrational and nonrational action, which rules out the possibility of the rigorous analysis and empirical study of the conditions determining the institutionalization of values'. Consequently, the Marxist theory of ideology 'concentrates attention on the cognitive obstacles to revolutionary consciousness', while Marxist analyses of class tend to ignore 'the status order, the primary focus of the integration of the ends of class actors'.<sup>69</sup>

Marx devotes several pages of *The German Ideology* to a critical discussion of 'the theory of utility'. He condemns Holbach because he 'depicts the entire activity of individuals in their mutual intercourse, e.g. speech, love, etc., as a relation of utility and utilization. Hence the actual relations that are presupposed here are speech, love, definite manifestations of definite qualities of individuals. Now these relations are supposed not to have the meaning *peculiar* to them but to be the expression and manifestation of some third relation attributed to them, the *relation of utility or utilization*.'

Nevertheless, 'the apparent absurdity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the *one* relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction arises from the fact that in modern bourgeois society all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation'.<sup>70</sup>

Treating social relationships as instrumental is specific to the capitalist mode of production: 'All this is actually the case with the bourgeois. For him only *one* relation is valid on its own account - the relation of exploitation; all other relations have validity for him only in so far as he can include them under this one relation; and even when he encounters relations which cannot directly be subordinated to the relation of exploitation,

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<sup>69</sup> D. Lockwood, 'The Weakest Link in the Chain? Some Comments on the Marxist Theory of Action', in R.L. and I.H. Simpson eds., *Research in the Sociology of Work*, I (Greenwich, CT, 1981), pp.441, 442,453, 476. See also Parsons, *Structure*, I, Pt.II.

<sup>70</sup> K.Marx and F. Engels, *CW*, VI, p.409.



he subordinates them to it at least in his imagination. The material expression of this use is money which represents the value of all things, people and social relations.’<sup>71</sup>

While ‘exploitation’ is here used by Marx in a broader sense than he would give the term in *Capital* where it refers to the appropriation of surplus-labour. One of the main themes of his mature economic writings is the manner in which competition brings about an equalization of different productive activities, reducing their distinct qualities to quantitative differences between units of abstract social labour.

That Marx rejects the utilitarian theory of action not just because it articulates a specifically bourgeois rationality but because it is profoundly wrong about the nature of human beings. It is clear from his denunciation of ‘the arch-philistine Jeremy Bentham’ in *Capital*: ‘To know what is useful to a dog, one must investigate the nature of dogs. This nature is not itself deducible from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would judge all human acts, movements, relations, etc. according to the principle of utility would first have to deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as historically modified in each epoch. Bentham does not trouble himself with this. With the driest naivete he assumes that the modern petty bourgeois, especially the English petty bourgeois, is the normal man.’<sup>72</sup>

Marx’s objection to the utilitarian theory of action is that by treating ‘the modern petty bourgeois’ as the ‘normal man’ it effectively homogenizes the qualitatively diverse abilities and dispositions of human beings and the ‘manifold relationships’ which these involves, to ‘the *one* relations of usefulness’ and thus misrepresents what ‘human nature in general’ is. At issue here are two different conceptions of human agency.

Charles Taylor argues that one characteristic of human agents is the ability to form ‘second-order desires’, that is, ‘the power to *evaluate* our desires, to regard some as desirable and others as undesirable’. But there are ‘two broad kinds of evaluation of desire.’ Thus someone might be weighing two desired actions to determine the most convenient, or how to make different desires compossible ... or how to get the most

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<sup>71</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *CW*, VI, p.410.

<sup>72</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, I (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp.758, 758-9, note 51.

overall satisfaction. Or he might be pondering to see which of two desired objects attracts him most, as one ponders a pastry tray to see if one will take an éclair or a mille feuilles. But what is missing in the above cases is a qualitative evaluation of my desires; the kind of thing we have, for instance, when I refrain from acting on a given motive - say, spite or envy - because I consider it base or unworthy. In this kind of case our desires are classified in such categories as higher and lower, virtuous and vicious, more and less fulfilling, more and less refined, profound and superficial, noble and base. They are judged as belonging to qualitatively different modes of life: fragmented or integrated, alienated or free, saintly or merely human, courageous or pusillanimous and so on.<sup>73</sup>

Taylor calls these two kinds of evaluation 'weak' and 'strong' respectively. The crucial difference between them is that 'in weak evaluation, for something to be judged good it is sufficient that it be desired, whereas in strong evaluation there is also a use of "good" or some other evaluative term for which being desired is not sufficient.' 'Strong evaluation deploys a language of evaluative distinctions'. And this leads to very different conceptions of agency. The subject of weak evaluation is 'a simple weigher of alternatives'. He is 'reflective in a minimal sense, that he evaluates courses of action, and sometimes is capable of acting out of that evaluation as against under the impress of immediate desire'. However, 'the reflection of the simple weigher terminates in the inarticulate experience that A is more attractive than B.' By contrast, 'for the strong evaluator reflection also examines the different modes of being of the agent. Motivations or desires don't only count in virtue of the attraction of the consummations but also in virtue of the kind of life and kind of subject that these desires properly belong to'.<sup>74</sup>

It is clear that the 'simple weigher' is none other than the human subject as conceived by the utilitarian theory of action. Strong evaluation no longer treats the agent's desires, the ends of action, as given, random, but subjects them to critical examination. As Taylor makes clear, this position presupposes evaluative realism, that

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<sup>73</sup> C. Taylor, 'What is Human Agency?' in T. Mischel ed., *The self: Psychological and Philosophical Issues* (Oxford, 1977), pp.103-4.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.104, 107, 112, 114.

is, the thesis that 'concerning strong evaluations, there is a fact of the matter.'<sup>75</sup> In other words, seeing human agents as strong evaluators means treating their moral judgements as factual assertions capable of being true and false like all such assertions and rejecting the moral non-cognitivism.<sup>76</sup>

Marx rejects the utilitarian theory of action because he believes human beings to be strong evaluators rather than simple weighers. There are two reasons for this. The first is what he contrasts to the 'principle of utility', namely 'all the manifold relationships of people', which are 'definite manifestations of definite qualities of individuals'. What we have here is an *anti*-utilitarian individualism. It lays stress on the diverse and distinct characteristics of people and on the irreducibility of these characteristics. Secondly, there are the general arguments for attributing to Marx an Aristotelian moral theory concerned with establishing the (empirically ascertainable) conditions of human well-being.

It is interesting that Amartya Sen's criticisms of the utilitarian theory of action highlights its inability to cater for moral judgements. He considers the theory of revealed preference, which formalizes this conception of action. It treats an agent's choices as indices of his underlying preferences and requiring of these preferences simply that they are consistent, so that if A chooses *x* rather than *y*, he must not, at some other time, choose *y* when *x* is also available. Sen comments: 'if you are consistent, then no matter whether you are a single-minded egoist, a raving altruist or a class-conscious militant, you will appear to be maximizing your utility in the enchanted world of definitions.' What this way of thinking about action leaves out of account is the case of 'commitment', which Sen defines 'in terms of a person choosing an act that he believes will yield him a lower level of personal welfare than an alternative that is also available to him'. In this case the agent decides *not* to maximize utility. This concept helps to

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<sup>75</sup> Taylor, 'Understanding and Explanation', in S.H. Holtzmann and C.M. Leich, *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London; 1981), p.200. See also P.Pettit, 'Reply: Evaluative "Realism" and Interpretation', *ibid*.

<sup>76</sup> The treatment of value-ascriptions as a matter of irreducibly subjective choice, that is, so deeply embedded in modern Western culture.

make sense of the fact that when confronted with situations having the form of the Prisoner's Dilemma 'people often do not follow the selfish strategy'. In other words, they do not take the instrumentally rational but collectively sub-optimal choice of confessing, even though by refusing to confess they run the risk of their least preferred solution, i.e. the maximum gaol sentence, if the other prisoner confesses. Sen argues that in such cases 'the person is *more* sophisticated than the theory allows'. Since he has been willing to 'consider the modifications of the game brought about through acting through commitment', i.e. through deciding not to confess come what may. Sen proposes that, rather than treat the agent as a 'rational fool decked in the glory of his *one* all-purpose preference ordering', we should ascribe to him, not one set of preferences but rather a 'meta-ranking' which expresses his preferences between different *sets* of preferences, expressing his evaluation, on moral, political or even class grounds, of different *kinds* of action.<sup>77</sup>

Jon Elster cites Davidson in support of the idea that we should presume that agents are rational: 'irrational behaviour only makes sense against a background of rationality.' This justifies the methodological injunction that 'the social scientist should be prepared to spend time and imagination in thinking up rational explanations for the action he observes, and only after repeated failure should he tentatively label the action as irrational.'<sup>78</sup> But the sort of general considerations which Davidson advances do not entail the utilitarian theory of action, concerning which he has expressed some scepticism.<sup>79</sup> All that they compel us to accept is the Principle of Humanity and the assumption that agents are behaviourally and attitudinally rational. They act in the light of beliefs and desires which they are prepared to modify in the light of inconsistency or empirical counter-examples. This is not equivalent to saying that agents optimize. One

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<sup>77</sup> A.K.Sen, 'Rational Fools', in A.K. Sen, *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* (Oxford, 1982), pp.89, 92, 103, 99, 100-101. See also A.K. Sen, 'Behaviour and the Concept of Preference', *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> J. Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (Cambridge, 1979), pp.154-5.

<sup>79</sup> See D. Davidson, 'Hempel on Explaining Action', in D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980).

can accept Elster's proposal that we presume agents are rational without therefore preferring rational-choice explanations.

Elster's substantive philosophical work has been concerned with the ways in which agents deviate from what is assumed about them in rational-choice models. Thus, he is led to weaken the identification of rationality with optimality, so that 'rationality sometimes must be understood as satisficing, i.e. as finding an alternative that is "good enough" for one's purposes rather than the "best".' Moreover, Elster is aware of the more general inadequacies of the utilitarian theory of action as they are highlighted by Marx, Taylor and Sen: 'the notion of rational behaviour relative to *given* (and consistent) desires and beliefs is an extremely thin one. In addition to this formal rationality we want to have substantive rationality, in the twin forms of *judgement* and *autonomy*.... If people are *agents* in a substantive sense, and not just the passive supports of their preference-structures and belief-systems, then we need to understand how judgement and autonomy are possible. This, in my view, is the outstanding unresolved problem both in philosophy and the social sciences.'<sup>80</sup>

It is also a problem that is extremely difficult to resolve if one takes the utilitarian theory of action as the bench-mark of rationality. The rational-choice Marxists' methodological individualism and their rejection of Marxist economic theory leaves them with no scope for social generalizations. The assumption that agents are optimizers provides them with a basis on which to formulate theories from which predictions can be derived. It meets a need, but only one which arises from their prior abandonment of classical historical materialism.

There are two final points to be made in this context. First, it should be noted that treating agents as strong evaluators is not vulnerable to the sort of objections which Parsons and Lockwood make to the utilitarian conception of action. For the agent *qua* evaluator acts in accordance with norms and values: their adoption is the outcome of a strong evaluation. The difference between this notion of agency and that implicit in the notion of non-rational action is that the first interprets value-ascriptions realistically, that

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<sup>80</sup> J. Elster, *Explaining Technical Change* (Cambridge, 1983), pp.74, 87-8. See also J. Elster, *Sour Grapes* (Cambridge, 1983), ch.I.

is as either true or false; their acceptance is, in principle, a *rational* process, reflectively engaged in, so that one can dispute a particular evaluation as mistaken. This amounts to incorporating the ascription of value-judgements into the practice of radical interpretation: 'If one is an evaluative realist then one's ascription of evaluative beliefs will not be independent of one's assessment of those beliefs; this, because one will not normally want to ascribe beliefs which, on one's own assessment, there is no reason to maintain.' This does not rule out the possibility of 'radical insight or discovery', where 'the aliens recognize a real value in a case where we have not hitherto acknowledged a value, or have perhaps denied that there is any.'<sup>81</sup> One virtue of conceiving agents as strong evaluators is that it avoids one of the characteristic vices of sociology. That is treating actors as 'cultural dopes', the bearers of norms which they have passively ingested through a process of 'socialization'. Parsons' writings are merely the clearest example of this approach.

Secondly it is right to think of agents as strong evaluators, it would be a mistake therefore to treat social theory as a branch of moral philosophy. More particularly, to be a strong evaluator is not inconsistent with being an individual acting on interests which bring one into conflict with others. Sandel concentrates his fire on the notion of agency present in the account which Rawls gives of the original position from which he derives his principles of justice. According to Rawls, Sandel argues, 'That we are distinct persons, characterized by separate systems of ends, is a necessary presupposition of a being capable of justice. What in particular our ends consist in, and whether in fact they happen to coincide or overlap with the ends of others is an empirical question that cannot be known in advance. This is the sense - epistemological rather than psychological - in which the plurality of subjects is given prior to their unity. We are distinct individuals first, and then (circumstances permitting) we form relationships and engage in co-operative arrangements with others.'<sup>82</sup>

Sandel claims that this way of viewing agents is implicit in Rawls's account of

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<sup>81</sup> Pettit, 'Reply', pp.242, 239.

<sup>82</sup> M.J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, 1982), p.53.

the 'circumstances of justice', the situation typical of human society, involving such features as 'moderate scarcity' and 'mutual disinterest', which gives rise to the need for principles of justice to regulate conflict.<sup>83</sup> 'The assumption of mutual disinterest', Sandel says, 'is not an assumption about what motivates people, but an assumption about the nature of subjects who possess motivations in general'. One implication of this is that 'on Rawls's view, a sense of community describes a possible aim of antecedently individuated selves, not an ingredient or constituent of their identity.' Justice can therefore only provide a framework within which to regulate the conflicts among antecedently individuated subjects. Sandel proposes a different conception of agency, one in which people 'conceive their identity - the subject and not just the object of their feelings and aspirations - as defined to some extent by the community of which they are part'. This 'constitutive' sense of community implies that 'when politics goes well, we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone.'<sup>84</sup>

Sandel offers an attractive alternative to liberal theories of justice such as Rawls's. The trouble is that politics usually goes very badly. The community of which agents are part gives them much of their identity. Its structure is also usually such as to bring them into conflict with one another. No social theory which concentrates on what people share within a given social formation, on what unites them, is likely to be of much help in making sense of what happens in that society. Rawls himself writes: 'The postulate of mutual disinterest in the original position is made to insure that the principles of justice do not depend on strong assumptions. Recall that the original position is meant to incorporate widely shared and yet weak conditions. A conception of justice should not presuppose, then, extensive ties of natural sentiment. At the basis of the theory, one tries to assume as little as possible.'<sup>85</sup>

Whether this is the right sort of constraint to put on a theory of justice is disputable. But certainly no plausible social theory should rely on 'strong assumptions'

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<sup>83</sup> J.Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 1971), p.126.

<sup>84</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism*, pp.54, 64, 150, 183.

<sup>85</sup> Rawls, *Theory*, p.129.

to the effect that agents' strong evaluations involve a constitutive sense of community that unites them. This is not to withdraw the idea that agents are strong evaluators rather than simple weighers. It is, rather, to say that we must also consider the way in which individuals' relations to social structures connect up with their beliefs and desires. That is, a *social* theory of agency must consider the question of the interests agents have, to which we now turn.

### Interests and Powers

The point of the concept of interests is to relate an agent's wants to the objective environment on which his or her opportunities for realizing those wants depend. William Connolly offers this analysis of the term 'interests': 'To say that a policy or practice is in the interests of an individual or a group is to assert both that the recipient would somehow benefit from it and that there is therefore a *reason* in support for enacting that policy. Of course, the reason may be overridden by other considerations. But it is important to see that, as it is used in our society, 'interests' is one of those concepts that connects descriptive and explanatory statements to normative judgements.<sup>86</sup>

So, to say that doing *x* is in A's interests is to give A a reason for doing *x*. Connolly observes that 'although ["interests"]... has been variously defined, all definitions seriously advanced make an important reference to the wants, preferences, and choices of agents somewhere in the definition.'<sup>87</sup> Or, as Anthony Giddens more succinctly puts it, 'interests are logically connected with wants.'<sup>88</sup> This is what is called the subjective conception of interest. It bears relation to the utilitarian theory of action. Because the agent's interests are identified with the ends he or she has chosen, reflecting his or her beliefs and desires. This way of viewing interests has had an important bearing on social theory, particularly in the shape of pluralist political science. It tacitly identifies interest with revealed preference, as is evident in Robert Dahl's

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<sup>86</sup> W.E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Oxford, 1983), p.46.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>88</sup> A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London, 1979), p.189.



insistence on treating as political issues only those which 'involve actual disagreement in preference between two or more groups.'<sup>89</sup>

Critics of pluralism have challenged this treatment of interests as revealed preferences. They point out that the exercise of power does not simply arise in cases of overt conflicts of (subjective) interest, but is also present in the 'mobilization of bias'. That is, in the 'elaboration of systems of evaluative beliefs which both alter the preferences of subordinate groups and prevent issues affecting them favourably from reaching the political agenda.'<sup>90</sup> This kind of consideration suggests that an agent may not be aware of his or her interests and that his or her wants and interests may conflict.

The possibility of conflicts between wants and interests has led to the claim that interests are 'real' or 'objective'. And to assert that agents may be unaware of their interests is to suggest that the interests are objective in one standard sense, where something is objective when it exists even when subjects are not conscious of its existence. Pluralists object most strongly to the idea of objective interests on grounds stated by Nelson Polsby: 'for pluralists, "false class consciousness" does not exist, for it implies that the values of analysts are imposed on groups in the community.'<sup>91</sup> On this view, to say that agents may be unaware of or mistaken about their interests is to allow the social theorist arbitrarily to impose his or her views of what is right onto the agents. This objection amounts to saying that the notion of objective interests breaks the connection between wants and interests. An agent's interests now have nothing to do with his or her wants.

Various attempts have been made to deal with this objection by giving an account of objective interests as still bearing an essential connection to wants. Typically this is done by defining interests counterfactually, as the wants we would have in conditions of perfect information. Connolly, for example, proposes the following: 'Policy *x* is more

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<sup>89</sup> R.A. Dahl, 'A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model', in R. Bell et al. eds., *Political Power*, (New York, 1969), p.39.

<sup>90</sup> P. Bachrach and M.S. Baratz, 'Two Faces of Power', in Bell et. al., *Power*, and on the whole 'Power Debate', S.Lukes, *Power* (London, 1974).

<sup>91</sup> N. Polsby, 'How to study community Power', in Bell et al. eds., *Power*, p.33.

in A's real interest than policy y if A, were he to experience x and y, would *choose* x as the result he would rather have for himself.' This involves, Connolly suggests, 'a choice between alternative experiences that is *fully informed* about the factors entering these experiences and helping to make each what it is'.<sup>92</sup> A more perspicuous version of the same kind of approach is offered by Elster, who defines class interests as, not 'the actual preferences and goals of the members' of the class, but rather 'goals that are somehow imputed to the members, such as the goals they would have if fully aware of the causes of, and possible remedies to, their situation'.<sup>93</sup>

The reason why the contrast between actual wants and counter-factual wants is a significant one is because of the existence of ruling ideologies preventing the mass of the population from having the requisite full knowledge of their situation. Thus Erik Olin Wright says that 'class interests in capitalist society are those potential objectives which become actual objectives of struggle in the absence of the mystifications and distortions of capitalist relations'.<sup>94</sup> In this way the definition seeks to capture the Marxist idea of workers often being misled about their interests without breaking the connection between interests and wants.

There are two difficulties with this move. This first is that counterfactual wants do not easily play a causal role. My interests are unlikely to influence my action if they are what I would want were I free from the influence of bourgeois ideology. Conceiving interests as counterfactual wants does, in principle, allow us to measure the distance between what agents actually want and what they would want if armed with full knowledge of their situation. But it does not allow us to predict what agents will do except to say that they will act in accordance with their interests. There is a tension here between two uses of 'interests': to appraise action and to explain it. The second difficulty with counterfactual wants is simply this. Supposing that I have full knowledge

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<sup>92</sup> Connolly, *Terms*, pp.64, 68.

<sup>93</sup> J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, 1985), p.349. See also A.E. Levine, *Arguing for Socialism* (London, 1984), p.110.

<sup>94</sup> E.O. Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London, 1978), p.89.

and that I have considered the alternatives carefully, as Connolly requires us, which should I choose? Will what I know make it obvious what I should want? But then we seem in some danger of breaking the connection between interests and wants, since what I want can, in these circumstances, somehow be read off the objective situation. Or perhaps I have a genuine choice, but whatever course of action I pursue will not have harmful consequences; the difference lies in the degree to which I will benefit from the various outcomes. But this just seems implausible.

If we are to conceive interests in this way, then some more definite account of how we would choose in the hypothetical condition of full knowledge is required. It is this kind of consideration which led Wright to propose the following approach: 'Deep down inside' people in general have a desire for freedom. In so far as the actual capacity that individuals have to make choices and act upon them - their real freedom - is shaped systematically by the class structure, they have objective class interests based on this real interest in freedom.<sup>95</sup>

This solves the problem of how to give a content to our interests, but at the price of embedding them into a normative philosophical anthropology. This is to base our theory of action on 'strong assumptions'. Moreover, once again we are in danger of breaking the link between wants and interests, since the implication of the phrase 'deep down inside' is presumably that agents may not be articulately aware of having the desire for freedom which Wright imputes to them.

The sorts of difficulties outlined have led some writers to seek to get rid of the concept of interests completely. Goran Therborn, for example, describes it as 'an utilitarian residue in Marxism, which should be rejected, explicitly and decisively, once for all'. He elaborates: 'Interests' by themselves do not explain anything. 'Interest' is a *normative* concept indicating the most rational course of action in a predefined game, that is, in a situation in which gain and loss have already been defined. The problem to be explained, however, is how members of different classes come to define the world and

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<sup>95</sup> E.O. Wright, *Classes* (London, 1985), p.249.

their situation and possibilities in a particular way.<sup>96</sup>

Therborn's objection to interests is that they play no explanatory role. They provide no help in the task of explaining how agents consciously engage in social action. A more radical challenge<sup>97</sup> is provided by Gareth Stedman Jones. He attacks the 'essentialist conception of class' shared by Marxist and non-Marxist historians of the British working-class movement: 'The implicit assumptions of civil society as a field of conflicting classes whose opposing interests will find rational expression in the political arena. Such interests, it is assumed, pre-exist their expression. Languages of politics are evanescent forms, mere coverings of an adequate, inadequate or anachronistic kind, through which essential interests may be decoded.'<sup>98</sup>

This approach reckons without the 'non-referential' character of language. Stedman Jones takes Saussure and those influenced by him to have established 'the materiality of language itself, the impossibility of simply referring it back to some primal anterior reality, "social being", the impossibility of abstracting experience from the language which structures its articulation'. This requires reconceptualizing the relationships between agents' conscious experience and social structures: 'Language disrupts any simply notion of the determination of consciousness by social being because it is itself part of social being. We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest in the first place. What we must therefore do is to study the production of interest, identification, grievance and aspiration within political languages themselves.'<sup>99</sup>

Stedman Jones might be said to offer a discursive conception of interests, in which they are whatever our political language says they are. This view differs from the

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<sup>96</sup> G. Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London, 1980), pp.5,10.

<sup>97</sup> Not simply to the concept of interests but also to the entire way of thinking about society involved in trying to distinguish these from agents' actual wants.

<sup>98</sup> G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), p.21.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, pp.20, 21-2.

subjective conception, since interests are identified, not by revealed preference, but by the particular discourse through which an agent articulates his or her feelings and beliefs about how society is run. Stedman Jones is proposing that we treat class 'as a discursive rather than an ontological reality.'<sup>100</sup>

Class is not an objective relationship defined by agents' position in the relations of production; rather, it is constructed within the political languages available to them.

Stedman Jones's argument for this conclusion is:

- (1) Agents do not experience (social) reality in a direct and unmediated way;
- (2) how agents articulate their experience depends on the particular forms of discourse they use;
- (3) language is non-referential;
- (4) we only have access to social reality through agents' experience of it

This is a sort of social Kantianism. Stedman Jones does not deny that social systems exist, only that we can appeal to them in accounting for what agents do. In any case, the argument doesn't hold up. (4) is a very strong claim to make, unless 'experience' is defined so widely<sup>101</sup> as to be vacuous. Any investigator would have to examine these different sources critically and seek to find ways of resolving the numerous inconsistencies in and between them. (1) and (2) are true but (3) is false. As Davidson's work shows a referential theory of language does not have to be atomistic, treating words as involving particular relations with specific items in reality. Davidson's is a holist theory of language, but one in which the ability of words to figure in an indefinite number of sentences is explained by means of the referential concept of satisfaction. Further, the case of radical interpretation shows that making sense of an agent's utterances is impossible unless we take account of their objective context.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), p.8.

<sup>101</sup> Embracing state papers, newspaper reports, official statistics, personal memoirs, popular songs, political pamphlets.

<sup>102</sup> See E.M. Wood, 'Post-Modernism, Post-Structuralism, Post-Marxism?', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2:3 (1985). For a critical discussion of *Languages of Class*, see *ibid.*, *The Retreat from Class* (London, 1986), ch.7.

Therborn's approach has some similarity to Stedman Jones's. He does not regard classes as discursive constructs. He is concerned with how agents caught up in these relationships come to be conscious actors. He believes, however, that it is possible to do this without using the concept of interests, so that what people want is given simply by the conjunction of their actual preferences and the discourses they use to articulate their experience. The danger with this approach is that it can lead to a version of normative functionalism. Thus Therborn writes: 'The formation of humans by every ideology... involves a process simultaneously of subjection and qualification. The amorphous libido and manifold potentialities of human infants are subjected to a particular order that allows certain drives and capacities, and prohibits and disfavours others. At the same time, through the same process, new members become qualified to take up and perform (a particular part of) the repertoire of roles given in the society into which they are born, including the role of possible agents of social change.'<sup>103</sup>

Compare this with Parsons' discussion of one of the two main mechanisms of social integration, namely, socialization, which has to cope with 'the "barbarian invasion" of the stream of newborn infants', and which seeks 'the integration of ego into a role complementary to that of alter(s) in such a way that the common values are internalized in ego's personality and their respective behaviours come to constitute a complementary role-expectation-sanction system'.<sup>104</sup> The similarities extend well beyond those of vocabulary (Therborn, for example, takes over Parsons' distinction between 'ego' and 'alter'). Both see agents as bundles of drives formed into coherent subjects through various social mechanisms which allocate to them a distinct role. Therborn objects to role theory on the grounds that it treats 'social behaviour' as 'normatively defined', is static and downgrades social contradictions. All these points are well taken but it remains the case that for Therborn social actors are not agents, able to pursue their own goals, but are rather social constructs, the passive bearers of social relations which may involve contradictions between the processes of subjection and qualification but of which the

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<sup>103</sup> Therborn, *Ideology*, p.17.

<sup>104</sup> T. Parsons, *The Social System* (London, 1951), pp.205-6, 208, 211.

actors themselves are also mere effects.<sup>105</sup>

The difficulty is really the one around which this entire thesis revolves - how to think of the relation between structures and agents. That part of the solution lies in understanding how action involves the exercise of structural capacities. There remains the question of how structures relate to agents' conscious experience. A great virtue of the notion of interests is that it allows us to connect the two without reducing either to the other. The same thought is expressed by Wright when he says that 'class interests ... [are] the link between class structure... and class struggle.'<sup>106</sup>

Anthony Giddens observes: 'To say that A has an interest in a given course of action, occurrence or state of affairs, is to say that the course of action, etc. facilitates the possibility of A achieving his or her wants. To be aware of one's interests, therefore, is more than to be aware of a want or wants; it is to know how to go about trying to realize them.'<sup>107</sup>

This is an objective conception of interests: 'Interests presume wants, but the concept of interest concerns not the wants as such, but the possible modes of their realization in given sets of circumstances; and these can be determined as "objectively" as anything in social analysis'. Secondly, these modes of realization will depend crucially on agents' structural capacities. That is, on the powers they derive from their position. A worker and a capitalist will have very different ways open to them of realizing their respective wants. Determining a person's interests is thus not, on this definition, a merely technical exercise. It depends on a rational assessment of the power that person has to realize his or her wants, and this power will largely turn on his or her position in the class structure. This leads directly to a third point. While groups do not have interests, since only persons can have wants, 'none the less actors have interests by virtue of their membership of particular groups, communities, classes etc.'<sup>108</sup> Why they do so is

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<sup>105</sup> See Therborn, *Ideology*, pp.20-2.

<sup>106</sup> Wright, *Class, Crisis*, p.98.

<sup>107</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems*, p.189.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.189.

clear enough once we have the concept of structural capacity: agents may have different wants, but their ability to realize them will depend on their shared position. Only persons have interests, but they will share them with others in the same class position. Finally agents' interests are likely to conflict since their different positions mean that they can only realize their wants by pursuing courses of action which cause them to clash.

There are two possible objections to this account of interests. The first is that it is a version of the utilitarian theory of action, in that it treats wants as given and concerns itself only with how to realize these wants. It is not a reply to this objection to point out that interests are not here identified with revealed preference. For the kinship with utilitarianism lies in the 'randomness' of the ends of action, as Parsons would put it. Consideration of interests thus conceived, the objector might contend, is nothing but a case of instrumental rationality. Because reason is exercised only to the extent of deciding on the most appropriate 'mode of realization' of a given end.

There are two answers to this objection. The first is that Giddens's definition of interests makes no presumption that an agent's wants are given by his or her preference-set, as required by rational-choice theory, or even that a single preference-set can be given. If we simply say that an agent's wants consist in his or her desires, then these desires will include his or her first and second-order desires. That is, they will include the commitments the agent has made, both as a result of his or her being brought up in a particular group<sup>109</sup> and in consequence of the more reflective process which Taylor calls 'strong evaluation'. Thus this account of interests does not treat the ends of action as given *per se*, but only as far as the determination of interests is concerned.

Secondly, bracketing wants in this way is inevitable if social theory is to find a place for agency in its explanations. If we are to say that social action involves conscious choices<sup>110</sup> then there is no alternative than to consider the ways in which agents with fairly diverse wants may still benefit from certain common courses of action. Andrew

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<sup>109</sup> Parsons' and Therborn's mistake is not that they talk of socialization, but that they make it constitutive of individual identity.

<sup>110</sup> That these choices issue from agents' beliefs and desires and that their desires cannot be read off from the social structure or deduced from an ethical theory.



Levine says that 'our true wants [i.e. our interests]... are our wants in so far as we are prudent.'<sup>111</sup> Levine treats interests as counterfactual wants and hence as reducible to wants. This is mistaken. Nevertheless, the invocation of prudence in this context is appropriate: agents who consider their interests, that is, the ways in which the realization of their wants depends on the powers they share with others are being prudent. This is not the only way in which reason governs action; it also enters into the selection of the ends of action. However, for some purposes we must treat these ends as given. If this is to collapse into the utilitarian theory of action, then it does not seem to be a terrible crime.

The second objection attacks the givenness of wants from another direction. Giddens's definition of interests supposes that we can treat wants as given and then consider their means of realization which depends particularly on agents' structural capacities. One of the mechanisms of 'irrational preference formation' discussed by Elster is: *Adaptive preference formation* is the adjustment of wants to possibilities - not the deliberate adaptation favoured by character planners, but a causal process occurring non-consciously. Behind this adaptation there is the drive to reduce the tension or frustration that one feels in having wants that one cannot possibly satisfy.<sup>112</sup>

Elster describes this as a case of 'sour grapes' - what one can't have, one doesn't want. It doesn't matter whether adaptive preferences are formed consciously or unconsciously, rationally or irrationally. It is that they are formed. In other words, that people cut their wants to fit their powers. The result is to remove the tension between wants and interests. Agents adjust their wants to the limited possibilities they see open to them. Consideration of interests will still enter into the picture but no very dramatic conflict between wants and interests is likely to arise.

One reply might be to suggest that wants are sticky downward. They will include certain basic needs into whose definition what Marx called 'a historical or moral element'

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<sup>111</sup> Levine, *Arguing*, p.110.

<sup>112</sup> Elster, *Sour Grapes*, p.25.

may well enter, but whose denial or restriction agents are likely to resist.<sup>113</sup> In other words, there is a limit to the extent to which preferences are adaptive. One's view of what is possible partly depends on harsh experience. Particularly concerning social action, it is also likely to be influenced by what ideologies say is possible and here it will often be the case that what is possible and what agents think is possible diverge greatly.

These considerations are important because the interaction between wants and powers will often be a dynamic one, with both agents' desires and their beliefs about what is possible changing and thus mutually reinforcing or undermining one another. David Montgomery is using the (modified) concept of adaptive preference when he says: 'What workers want is a function of what they consider realistically they can get.'<sup>114</sup>

The concept of interests acts as a hinge connecting conscious experience and objective structures, since it refers to the way in which agents' realization of their interests depends on their structural capacities. If structural capacities consist in the powers agents have by virtue of their position in the relations of production, then organizational capacities are those 'which are constituted by the conscious organization of the members of that class'.<sup>115</sup> It is on agents' structural capacities and not their organizational capacities that the realization of their wants fundamentally depend.

So linking interests and structural capacities is a perfectly defensible move. In the first place, talk of interests is unlikely to be of much use unless they are relatively enduring. Moreover, it is reasonable to think of a class's organizational capacities depending on and being limited by its structural capacities. Given the dependence of organizational on structural capacities, it is appropriate to associate interests with the more fundamental capacity.

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<sup>113</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, I, p.275.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in J. Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston, 1977), p.xiv.

<sup>115</sup> Wright, *Class, Crisis*, p.99.

## CHAPTER IV

# IDEOLOGY AND POWER

### Collective Agents

So far I have talked only of individual agents. The extension of the term 'agent' has been restricted to individual human organisms. This usage flows from the account of agency given in chapters 1 and 3. To be an agent so far has been to be a human organism to which beliefs and desires can be ascribed on the basis of the Principle of Humanity. This understanding of agency is basic. Insisting that this is so is essential as a corrective both to the poststructuralist abolition of the subject and to the functionalist tendency to treat society as itself an organism with its own needs. However, I now consider collective agents as well. The main theme of the preceding chapters has been that agents draw their powers in part from structures (the forces and relations of production) which divide them into classes with conflicting interests. The fact that agents have shared interests by virtue of the structural capacities they derive from their position in the relations of production, makes it essential to consider to forms of collective organization through which they seek to pursue these interests.

Individual agents (or, as I shall henceforth tend to call them persons) are primary. It is they who form collectivities in order to pursue their objectives. The bases of collective action comprise not just agents but the structures from which they derive the power to realize their ends. Collective action may be defined simply as any attempt by persons to co-ordinate their actions so as to achieve some goal or goals. This is a very minimal conception of collective agency. Greater interest centres on patterned and enduring forms of collective action. Of these the most developed and formalized are organizations. Tom Burns defines an organization as 'an assembly of human resources equipped and directed according to rational principles as instruments for use in achieving specified ends'.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a level of analysis intermediary between that of collective action as such and that of organizations. This concerns what is called

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<sup>1</sup> T. Burns, 'On the Rationale of the Corporate System', in R. Marris ed., *The Corporate Society* (London, 1974), p.152.

collectivities. A collectivity exists where persons co-ordinate their actions because they believe themselves to have a common identity.

The difference between collectivity and mere collective action turns upon the consciousness which agents have of themselves. It may be that persons co-ordinating their actions have much in common that leads them to co-ordinate their actions. But unless they believe themselves to have something in common and treat this as the basis of their collective action, they are not a collectivity.

The distinction is brought out by Anthony Giddens's discussion of the kinds of attitudes members of the same class may have. He differentiates class awareness from class-consciousness. Of the class awareness he writes: 'in so far as class is a structured phenomenon, there will tend to exist a common awareness and acceptance of similar attitudes and beliefs, linked to a common style of life, among members of the class.' But this class awareness does not involve the recognition by those having it that they belong to the same class and are different from members of other classes. Class awareness stems from a shared class position but does not acknowledge its existence. Class-consciousness, however, does. Giddens distinguishes between three levels of class-consciousness. (a) Class identity - it involves the minimal recognition of shared class membership; (b) Conflict consciousness - here oppositions of interest between different classes are also acknowledged, and (c) Revolutionary class-consciousness, the 'recognition of the possibility of an overall reorganization in the institutional mediation of power... and a belief that such a reorganization can be brought about through class action'.<sup>2</sup>

So unless class-consciousness in one of these three forms exists a class is not a collectivity. This is not to make class-consciousness a condition of the existence of class tout court. The Marxist theory of class treats it as an objective social relationship: classes may exist and class struggle go on without class-consciousness necessarily being manifest. For class struggle to occur some degree of collective action is necessary: members of the same class must co-ordinate their efforts in order either to increase or

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<sup>2</sup> A. Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London, 1981), pp.111-13.

to reduce the rate of exploitation. But this need not involve recognition of shared class identity.

So classes may but need not be collectivities. One should not, however, generalize from this case and say that collectivities necessarily emerge from the recognition of pre-existing social relationships. The formation of a collectivity may create a social relationship. The most important example is that of nations. Benedict Anderson defines a nation as 'an imagined political community': 'the members of even the smallest nation will not know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion'.<sup>3</sup> It is a necessary condition of the existence of a nation that its members believe that it exists. There are no nations in themselves.

The most important cases of collectivities are classes and nations. Organizations embrace state apparatuses, political parties, trade unions. The difference between organizations and collectivities is that the organizations have a structure while the collectivities need not. In particular, any organization has some procedure through which decisions binding on all its members are arrived at. The formally laid-down procedures may not identify the real site of decision-making, and in any case decisions are often sabotaged or at least altered in their implementation. Such issues form the focus of the sociological analysis of organizations.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, no organization can exist without some mechanism for determining how its members should act as members of that organization. A sense of collective identity by contrast does not entail the existence of any such procedure.

There is all the same a close relationship between organizations and collectivities. A belief in shared identity may give rise to a particular organization in the way in which colonial liberation movements tended to arise out of a growing sense of national consciousness among the subjects of the European empires. The formation of an organization may strengthen a shared identity, in the way in which the spread of trade

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<sup>3</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1983), p.15.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Michels's *Political Parties* (New York, 1962).

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unions promotes class-consciousness. The kind of effect may be quite unintended: that the expansion of the English state contributed to the emergence of English nationalism was in no sense anticipated. At the limit, however, the interaction between organization and collectivity may involve the organization claiming represent, embody, or even be the collectivity, in the way in which some liberation movements with the nation.

Various issues are raised by the foregoing discussion. The first concerns the very rationality of collective action. This takes the form above all of the free-rider problem.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, collectivities exist if and only if their members co-ordinate their actions in the light of the identity they believe themselves to share. This raises the issue of the beliefs agents have about society, in other words, the question of ideology. Thirdly, is there any priority of importance among different kinds of collectivity?

I shall first examine the classical Marxist theory of ideology and whether, as it is sometimes taken to imply, the stability of class societies depends on the masses' belief in the legitimacy of the existing order. Having established the falsehood of this 'dominant ideology thesis', I then argue that a weaker version, which abandons the claim that ideology is necessarily false consciousness and treats it instead, following Gramsci, as the articulation of interests, can be sustained. The fact that ideologies typically address ('interpellate') agents as the bearers of various identities, leads to an extended historical discussion of whether the palpable reality of national identities and conflicts undermines the primacy accorded by Marxism to class antagonisms.

### **Falsehood and Ideology, I**

Consider the following definition of ideology: an ideology is:

- (1) a set of widely held beliefs;
- (2) whose acceptance is socially caused;
- (3) which are false;
- (4) whose acceptance is in the interests of the ruling class.

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<sup>5</sup> That is, of whether it is rational for any individual to engage in collective action even if the goal of that action is one he or she desires.

I do not in fact think this is a satisfactory definition: (3) and (4) in particular are introduced less because I believe them to be true (since I do not) but rather in order to help focus discussion of how people engage in collective action.

(1) may seem innocuous, but in fact is inconsistent with one very influential Marxist conception of class-consciousness. Erik Olin Wright writes: 'There are two quite different usages of the expression 'class-consciousness' in the Marxist tradition. For some theorists it is seen as a counterfactual or imputed characteristic of classes as collective entities, whereas for others it is understood as a concrete attribute of human individuals as members of classes'.<sup>6</sup>

Ideology is understood here very much in the second sense. The main example of the first is Lukacs's conception of imputed class-consciousness. In *History and Class Consciousness* he tends to treat the proletariat as a collective subject endowed with consciousness in essentially the same way as individual subjects have beliefs and desires. This is, quite simply, wrong: classes are not supra-individual persons but groups of agents with a shared position in the relations of production, which may form themselves into collectivities. Treating class-consciousness as something which can be imputed to agents simply by virtue of their objective relationship to the means of production understates the difficulties involved in sub-ordinate classes actually becoming collectivities. Moreover, it mistakes the role played by class-consciousness in the process: it isn't the 'objective' property of the class but rather a means by which the latter forms itself into a collectivity.<sup>7</sup>

Ideology, then, is 'a concrete attribute of human individuals'. 'Understood in this way', says Wright, 'to study "consciousness" is to study a particular aspects of mental life of individuals, namely, those elements of a person's subjectivity which are discursively accessible to the individual's own awareness.'<sup>8</sup> Persons hold ideological beliefs, not classes. However, they do so because of social mechanisms. Such is the

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<sup>6</sup> E.O. Wright, *Classes* (London, 1985), p.242.

<sup>7</sup> See G. Stedman Jones, 'The Marxism of the Early Lukacs', *New Left Review*, 70 (1971).

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Classes*, p.244.

claim made by (2). As Jon Elster puts it, 'the study of ideology purports to explain why many similarly situated individuals come to accept the same views, or to produce them simultaneously.'<sup>9</sup> Explaining why an individual holds ideological beliefs is a matter of analysing social processes, not of diagnosing intellectual error or individual pathology. Ideology is social consciousness.

It is also, according to (3), false consciousness. The concept of ideology has its origins in Bacon's theory of idols. It was taken up by such philosophes as Helvetius and Holbach in their critique of the prejudices, above all religion, preventing mankind from recognizing its interests. The main agency through which false beliefs were inculcated into the masses was provided by the clergy. Marx takes over and radicalizes this analysis by inserting it into his general theory of class struggle. As Jorge Larrain puts it, 'ideology for Marx, as a distorted consciousness has a particular negative connotation whose two specific and connected features are, firstly, that it conceals social contradictions and, secondly, that it does it in the interest of the ruling class.' There is thus an intimate relation between (3) and (4). To quote Larrain again, ideology serves the interests of the dominant class 'not because it has been produced by the ideologists of the class - which may or may not be the case - but because the concealment of contradictions objectively works in favour of the dominant class's interest'.<sup>10</sup> The acceptance of ideological beliefs is in the interests of the ruling class because they are false, mystifying the reality of exploitation and oppression.

One cannot, however, use (4), the claim that ideological beliefs are in the ruling class's interest, to explain (1), their widespread acceptance. To do so would be to commit the fallacy of functional explanation, to account for a social phenomenon in terms

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<sup>9</sup> J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, 1985), p.464. Asserting, as is stated in (2), that the acceptance of ideologies is socially caused, side-steps the issue of the formation of beliefs and thus avoids the common objection to the Marxist theory of ideology, that it is self-refuting. See *ibid.*, pp.473-6.

<sup>10</sup> J. Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology* (London, 1979), pp.58, 61. See also H. Barth, *Truth and Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976).



of the benefits it brings.<sup>11</sup> We require some mechanism by virtue of which to explain how the prevailing ideology is one that benefits the ruling class. Marx in different writings offers two such mechanisms.

The first is given in this passage in *The German Ideology*: 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it'.<sup>12</sup>

This analysis is a development of the Enlightenment critique of religion as a conspiracy of priests and rulers to keep the masses in the dark. It differs primarily in rooting the generation of mass illusions in broader class relations. But it is vulnerable to the kind of objection made to the philosophes. That is, it treats the subordinate classes as passive receptacles of ideas inculcated in them from above. The effect is to 'divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society', whether it be the priests or those who seek to liberate the masses from their illusions.<sup>13</sup>

The second mechanism is not vulnerable to the same objection. It is provided by the theory of commodity fetishism in *Capital*. According to this theory the fact that under capitalism social relationships between producers are mediated by the exchange of commodities means that 'the definite social relation between men themselves ... assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.'<sup>14</sup> As a result the historically specific phenomenon of capitalism is universalized, naturalized. There is thus a material basis for bourgeois ideology: the operation of the market economy itself induces ideological beliefs in the agents of capitalist production. Therefore the acceptance of ideological beliefs is spontaneously generated by capitalist relations of production

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<sup>11</sup> See J. Elster, *Sour Grapes* (Cambridge, 1985), ch.IV.

<sup>12</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *CW*, V, p.59.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4. See also Larrain, *Concept*, p.26.

<sup>14</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, I (Harmondsworth, 1976), p.165.

themselves. The trouble with this theory lies in its very strength. The theory in this version involves a fallacy. For capitalist relations themselves to bring about the acceptance of ideological beliefs their appearance must admit of only one interpretation. That is, they are relations between things rather than social relationships. But this is not so: all theories are underdetermined by the evidence for them. Even if capitalist relations do present themselves in the naturalized, fetishized manner, there is an indefinite number of different ways of interpreting these same appearances.

There is, however, a deeper difficulty with the definition of ideology. The passage cited above from *The German Ideology* is the locus classicus of what has come to be known as the dominant ideology thesis, summarized as follows by Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan Turner: 'Through its control of ideological production, the dominant class is able to supervise the construction of a set of coherent beliefs ... The dominant ideology penetrates and infects the consciousness of the working class, because the working class comes to see and to experience reality through the conceptual categories of the dominant class. The dominant ideology functions to incorporate the working class within a system which is, in fact, operating against the material interests of labour. The incorporation in turn explains the coherence and integration of capitalist society'.<sup>15</sup>

Versions of the dominant ideology thesis are very widely held. It is a characteristic feature of Western Marxism that it focuses on mechanisms of ideological domination as the principal means through which capitalist social formations are reproduced. But the thesis's influence stretches much further. Elster, for example, asserts that 'it is a massive fact of history that the values and the beliefs of the subjects tend to support the rule of the dominant groups.'<sup>16</sup>

Immanuel Wallerstein thinks not: 'It is doubtful if very many governments in human history have been considered 'legitimate' by the majority of those exploited, oppressed and mistreated by their governments. The masses may be resigned to their fate, or

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<sup>15</sup> N. Abercrombie et al., *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London, 1980), pp.1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Elster, *Sour Grapes*, p.164.

sullenly restive, or amazed at their temporary good fortune, or actively insubordinate. But governments tend to be endured, not appreciated or admired or loved or even supported'.<sup>17</sup>

Abercrombie, Hill and Turner challenge the dominant ideology thesis not simply in its Marxist form, but also in the version offered by Talcott Parsons. That is, the idea that it is the normative integration of actors into society which explains social stability. They argue that the penetration of the dominant ideology into the subordinate classes has generally been slight. The principal mechanisms of social control have been provided by armed coercion or what Marx called the 'silent compulsion of economic relations'. The main role of the dominant ideology has been to secure the cohesion and reproduction of the ruling class, not to integrate the masses within the existing social order.

Taken as claims about the past Abercrombie, Hill and Turner's arguments are extremely difficult to appraise, given that we possess records mainly of what members of the dominant class thought and said. However, the results<sup>18</sup> of the investigation of the the popular culture of early modern Europe are fascinating and tend in favour of the critics of the dominant ideology thesis.

Michel Foucault has focused attention on the emergence at the end of the eighteenth century of new forms of power which he calls the disciplines. He contrasts them with the spectacular and barbaric executions characteristic of absolutism, a form of power which 'in absence of continuous supervision ... was recharged in the ritual display of its reality as "super-power".' The disciplines, represented by such typical institutions of modernity as the prison, the factory and the hospital, involve instead the regulated and systematic supervision of individual behaviour thereby penetrating 'down to the finest grain of the social body'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, I (New York, 1974), pp.143-4.

<sup>18</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, 1973). See generally C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (London, 1980). P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978). E.P. Thompson. 'Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context', *Midland History* (1972).

<sup>19</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London, 1977), pp.57, 80-1.

Anthony Giddens has the disciplines in mind when he writes of 'surveillance... the accumulation of "information" - symbolic materials which can be stored by an agency or collectivity', and 'the supervision of the activities of subordinates by their superiors within a collectivity'. He argues that 'as an integral and pervasive element of social integration, surveillance in each sense only becomes of major importance with the advent of capitalism.' In pre-capitalist class societies, the extraction of surplus-labour depended on 'extra- economic coercion', the armed force of the state or of local landowners. 'The power of those who needed to extract coercively taxation, or other forms of tribute or services from populations subject to their rule, did not penetrate many aspects of daily life, which were nourished from other sources.' To put it in the terms provided by David Lockwood, system-integration depended on the military power of the ruling class. Social integration, involving the existence of shared beliefs and traditions, was sharply separate. It operated chiefly at the level of local peasant communities and largely ignored by the dominant class. Capitalist exploitation, however, depends primarily on the economic pressures on workers to sell their labour-power and its rate is generally directly related to the level of labour productivity. The systematic supervision of the subordinate class both inside and outside the process of production therefore becomes of much greater importance to the exploiters. 'The "state" is a much more intrusive and comprehensive set of institutions in capitalist than in class-divided [i.e. pre-capitalist class] societies, so far as those subject to its administration internally are concerned.'<sup>20</sup>

Giddens's analysis is illuminating. It finds support from Michael Mann's discussion of the limitations of what he calls 'infrastructural power', i.e. 'the capacity to actually penetrate society and to implement logistically political decisions' of that most formidable of pre-capitalist states, the empire.

It is only with the advent of modernity that the ruling class acquires both an interest and increasingly the means to penetrate the daily life of the masses. Edward Thompson has pointed to the replacement of the 'task-oriented' conception of time inseparable from the irregular patterns of work dependent ultimately on the cycles of

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<sup>20</sup> A. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (London, 1981), pp.169, 170, 103, 165.

nature by time thought of as linear and homogeneous, 'time-measurement as a means of labour-exploitation' or, more crudely, time as money.<sup>21</sup> But this growth in the surveillance of the subordinate classes might lead one to conclude that while the dominant ideology thesis may be false when applied to pre-capitalist societies it is true of the capitalist mode of production.

Such a conclusion would be mistaken. A number of studies provide little support for any belief in an all-pervading dominant ideology.<sup>22</sup>

### **Falsehood and Ideology, II**

The dominant ideology thesis must, then, be accounted false (although a weaker version, as we shall see, can be defended). Does the dominant ideology thesis in its demise take the theory of ideology with it? Abercrombie, Hill and Turner seem at times to imply as much.<sup>23</sup> This iconoclasm is a refreshing corrective to western Marxism's obsession with ideology, but it could have misleading consequences. A main thrust of this thesis has been to insist that human beings must be seen as agents, conscious actors moved by beliefs and desires. Further, I suggested earlier that the formation of collectivities depends critically on the beliefs that agents have about their social identity. The analysis of ideology is essential to social theory, provided that 'ideology' is understood as, in Marx's words, 'the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic -- in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict [i.e. that

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<sup>21</sup> E.P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 38 (1967). See more generally Burke, *Popular Culture*, ch.9.

<sup>22</sup> M. Mann, 'The Social Cohesion of Liberal Democracy', *American Sociological Review*, 35:3 (1970). G. Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London, 1980). See generally the discussion of 'forms of ideological domination' in *ibid.*, ch.5.

<sup>23</sup> See especially Abercrombie et al., *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London, 1980), ch.6 and appendix; and the critical discussion of their book in G. Therborn, 'New Questions of Subjectivity', *New Left Review*, 143 (1984).

between the forces and relations of production] and fight it out'.<sup>24</sup> Such an understanding of ideology implies rejecting conditions (3) and (4) of the definition. Ideological beliefs need not be false, nor does this acceptance necessarily benefit the ruling class. Instead we should follow Therborn in using 'ideology' simply to 'refer to that aspect of the human condition under which human beings live their lives as conscious actors in a world that makes sense to them in different ways'.<sup>25</sup>

Conceiving ideology as false consciousness is implied by the claim involved in the dominant ideology thesis that class societies survive by virtue of the acceptance by the subordinate class of the false belief that their exploitation is just. Once we see that the claim itself is false there is no need to identify ideology with illusion. Ideological beliefs are, like all beliefs, either true or false, but the truth-value of a belief does not enter into the criteria to be used for distinguishing between the ideological and the non-ideological. The epistemological notion of ideology as false consciousness<sup>26</sup> must finally be rejected.

Such a move has the positive effect of allowing us to broaden the study of ideology by relating it to that of practical consciousness in general. Anthony Giddens has stressed what he calls the 'knowledgeability' of human agents, the fact that the members of a society know far more about the nature of the world in which they live than most social scientists are prepared to give them credit for.<sup>27</sup> There are deep philosophical reasons why this should be so, as Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit bring out when discussing Donald Davidson's Principle of Charity: 'The actions which the beliefs [i.e. those which inform practical activity] are invoked to explain are people's everyday, more or less successful exchanges with one another and with their environment; actions such as those of finding food, making deals, building huts, and so on. The success of these exchanges

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<sup>24</sup> K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (London, 1971), p.21.

<sup>25</sup> Therborn, *Ideology*, pp.1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Deriving ultimately from the Enlightenment critique of religious prejudice.

<sup>27</sup> See A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge, 1984), ch.1.

cannot be generally put down to coincidence and fortune. But if we are to make the success intelligible without invoking the forces of accident, we must suppose that the beliefs underlying the actions are true: were they false, success would be the product of accident. Thus we find in the beliefs informing practical activity a set of beliefs in which the interpreter may safely assume a preponderance of truth'.<sup>28</sup>

Macdonald and Pettit's examples of practical activity imply a consensual view of social practice as the co-operative pursuit of shared goals. We do not therefore enter the world of false consciousness. Agents on both sides of the class divide are likely to have many true beliefs concerning the conflictual relationship they find themselves in.

Foucault has written of the 'rationality of power' as that of 'tactics which are often perfectly explicit at the limited level where they are inscribed - local cynicism of power', of 'talkative tactics whose "inventors" ... are often without hypocrisy'. Historians have been able to uncover documents in which policy-makers discuss the alternative strategies available to them with astonishing lucidity.

Elster defends a fairly traditional account of ideology: not only does he accept the dominant ideology thesis but he also identifies ideology with false consciousness. The argument goes like this. 'A belief is rationally caused if (i) the causes of the belief are reasons for holding it and (ii) the reasons cause the beliefs qua reasons, not in some accidental manner.' The social causes of beliefs do not generally cause them in this way and so one must assume that 'a socially caused belief will not be rationally grounded.' Furthermore, 'there is a presumption that true beliefs are rationally grounded', which, in conjunction with the preceding steps, 'creates a case for the falsity of socially caused beliefs'.<sup>29</sup>

Elster distinguishes between two kinds of social causation of beliefs, interest-explanation and position-explanation, that is, respectively: 'explanations that refer to the interests of the believer (or some other agent) and those that refer to his economic or social position... All position explanations are causal, but interest-explanations may

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<sup>28</sup> G. Macdonald and P. Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London, 1981), p.27.

<sup>29</sup> Elster, *Making Sense*, p.474.

be causal as well as functional. A belief, that is, may be explained by the fact that it is shaped by interests as well as by the fact that it serves certain interests'.<sup>30</sup>

Elster's presumption that socially caused beliefs are not rationally grounded, combined with his search for 'microfoundations', leads him to draw on work on cognitive psychology and explain such beliefs as the result either of the interference of psychic drives in the process of belief-formation or of distortions in that process itself.<sup>31</sup> There is no reason to join Elster in this collapse into psychologism.

In the first place, the opposition between position- and interest-explanations is overstated. If interests are related to agents' position in the relations of production then it does not seem that any sharp distinction between position and interests can be made out. The concept of interests concerns the interaction between agents' beliefs and desires and their objective social positions. In his discussion of ideology, however, Elster identifies interests with agents' subjective wants or with the drives underlying these wants.

Secondly, the 'presumption that true beliefs are rationally grounded' is quite untenable. As William Shaw puts it, 'it is an elementary truth of logical analysis that the origin of a belief is not relevant to its evaluation as true or false'.<sup>32</sup> Thirdly, and more positively, why should one presume that socially caused beliefs are not rationally grounded? Agents seeking to pursue their interests may form many beliefs concerning the nature of society and their position within it. They may do so quite reflectively, but the resulting beliefs are socially caused in the sense that their formulation reflects the position, needs and purposes of the agents concerned. Elster might object that to describe such beliefs as socially caused is to deprive the notion of causation of any meaning. But the beliefs concerned are socially caused in the sense that, were those who hold them not in a certain position in the relations of production, they would not have come to accept

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<sup>30</sup> Elster, *Making Sense*, p.465.

<sup>31</sup> See Elster, *Sour Grapes*, ch I and IV.

<sup>32</sup> W.H. Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', in K. Neilsen and S.C. Patten eds., *Marx and Morality*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supp. vol.VII (1981), p.28.



them. Nevertheless, there is no reason to assume that the acceptance of these beliefs necessarily involved some interference with processes of rational reflection. To suppose otherwise implies that knowledge can never be perspectival, formulated within a framework shaped by specific interests and purposes.<sup>33</sup>

The primary sense in which ideologies are socially caused is that they are articulations of interests. They are attempts to give conscious expression to the needs of agents occupying particular positions within the relations of production. Since interests differ and conflict, so too will ideologies. This does not mean that all ideologies are true in a reversal of the false consciousness thesis. There are three reasons for it. First, a particular ideology may not succeed in its attempt to articulate the interests of a given class. Precisely because they depend on the objective structure of class relations, interests are by no means easy to ascertain.

Secondly, viewing society from a particular class position involves having a certain perspective on the world, which may set limits to what one sees or does not see. This need not involve any interference with the cognitive processes of belief-formation. The most interesting Marxist position-explanations<sup>34</sup> focus the way in which the most theoretically sophisticated articulations of capitalist class-interests are likely to involve characteristic blindnesses. These centre on the mistaken treatment of capitalist rationality as the ultimate form of rationality, with which what Giddens identifies as the 'principal ideological forms', 'the representation of sectional interests as universal ones ... the denial or transmutation of contradictions ...[and] ... the naturalization of the present', are closely associated.<sup>35</sup> Such forms are likely to be found in articulations of the interests of a class whose domination is of necessity historically limited and transitory.

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<sup>33</sup> See. B.A.O. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, 1985), ch.8; and John McDowell's review of this book in *Mind*, XVC (1986).

<sup>34</sup> Those by Marx himself of political economy in *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus-Value*, and by Lukacs of the 'antinomies of bourgeois thought' in *History and Class Consciousness*.

<sup>35</sup> A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London, 1979), p.196.

Thirdly, 'ideologies actually operate in a state of disorder', as Therborn puts it.<sup>36</sup> Gramsci rejects the problematic of false consciousness. Discourse generally is for Gramsci the articulation of interests: 'Our knowledge of things is nothing more than ourselves, our needs and interests.' This preoccupation with practical consciousness leads him to argue that there is to be found in the consciousness of subordinate classes in general and the proletariat in particular 'the co-existence of two conceptions of the world: 'one affirmed in words and the other displayed in effective action'.<sup>37</sup>

This state of affairs 'signifies that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes - when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in 'normal times' - that is when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate'.<sup>38</sup>

It is not clear how a conception of the world can be said to be implicit in the practice of a given class. Workers form beliefs which seek to articulate their interests as an exploited class. Gramsci's concept of contradictory consciousness is of fundamental importance, since it provides a theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon of dual consciousness. The 'means of mental production' - the education system, the mass media etc. - do not so much induce a systematically false consciousness as prevent the formation of a coherent class-consciousness, in particular by impeding the kind of theoretical reflection which would be necessary to remove inconsistencies and to arrive at a coherent analysis of existing society.

A weaker version of the dominant ideology thesis can therefore be sustained. The dominant ideology is dominant in the sense that the ruling class will seek to prevent

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<sup>36</sup> Therborn, *Ideology*, p.77.

<sup>37</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, 1971), pp.368, 328.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.327.

subordinate classes from developing an ideology which systematically challenges its right to rule. Chris Harman puts it very well: 'Of course, all sorts of subordinate ideologies exist, which express direct experiences of subordinate classes. But any ruling class takes action the moment these begin to generalize into an alternative world-view that challenges its hegemony. For example, look at the attitude of the medieval Catholic Church towards 'heretical' movements - seeking to absorb some elements in them (the Franciscans etc.) but to persecute others'.

So far I have treated ideologies purely from a cognitive point of view, that is, as bodies of assertoric sentences whose acceptance or rejection agents justify on the grounds of their truth or falsehood. But the concept of interpellation requires to view them as a different kind of speech-act, which subsumes the individual under a particular form of identity depending on the manner in which it addresses him or her.

Althusser introduces the concept of interpellation in his essay on ideology: 'Ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), 'or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by the very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place on the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one- hundred-and-eighty degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed'.<sup>39</sup>

Althusser's thesis that interpellation transforms individuals into subjects is closely bound up with the claim that the form of subjectivity is itself essential to the functioning of ideology. The ideology is conceived as individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence. To accept this would be to reduce agency to an ideological illusion. Therborn tends towards a similar approach, as when he writes that 'to conceive a text or an utterance as ideology is to focus on the way it operates in the formation and

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<sup>39</sup> L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (London, 1971), pp.162-3.

transformation of human subjectivity.<sup>40</sup> Such formulations are redolent of the oversocialized conception of human nature which Therborn shares with Parsons and with Althusser, in which individuals are not agents but rather raw material which ideology transforms into subjects ready to submit to their predestined role in the relations of production. Such a view predominates in Althusser's extremely functionalist account of interpellation is evident from passages such as the following: 'the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection.'<sup>41</sup>

According to Therborn's version, ideologies do not interpellate us as subjects or even the bearers of Parsonian social roles. Rather, a particular ideology invites us to accept a particular kind of social identity. Moreover, since 'ideologies differ, compete, and clash' the individual has some choice as to which identity he or she will accept. No longer does the naked individual confront a super-Subject. For example, the policeman as representative of social order. Nor does acceptance of the address necessarily imply subjection. It can be a liberation.

The kind of ideological struggle which leads to the contradictory consciousness discussed by Gramsci involves then not simply a confrontation of different views of the world but also a conflict of interpellations, in which people are invited to accept different social identities. Dual consciousness is characterized by the acceptance of two identities - as member of a class and as member of a nation-state. These identities imply an involvement in different kinds of social conflicts such as the power struggle between nation-states.

### **Nation, State and Military Power**

G.A. Cohen objects to Marx's philosophical anthropology because it treats human

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<sup>40</sup> Therborn, *Ideology*, p.2.

<sup>41</sup> Althusser, *Lenin*, p.169. It is because he rejects such an oversocialized view of human beings that Wright insists, against Therborn, that 'ideology concerns the process of formation of human consciousness not the totality of human subjectivity', *Classes*, p.245.

beings as essentially producers who realize themselves by the full use of their capacities: 'In his anti-Hegelian, Feuerbachian affirmation of the radical objectivity of matter, Marx focused on the relation of the subject to an object that is no way subject, and, as time went on, he came to neglect the subject's relation to itself, and that aspect of the subject's relation to others which is mediated (that is, indirect) form of relation to itself. He rightly reacted against Hegel's extravagant representation of all reality as ultimately an expression of self, but he overreacted, and he failed to do justice to the self's irreducible interest in a definition of itself, and to the social manifestations of that interest'.<sup>42</sup>

As it stands, Cohen's criticism of Marx's conception of human nature amounts to an acknowledgement of the dimension stressed by the hermeneutic tradition. That is, of the need human beings have for an identity involving membership of a community typically constituted by enduring tradition. He goes on, however, to connect this need to national and racial identities: 'I claim, then, that there is a human need to which Marxist observation is commonly blind, one different from and as deep as the need to cultivate one's talents. It is the need to be able to say not what I can do but who I am, satisfaction of which has historically been found in identification with others in a shared culture based on nationality, or race, or some slice or amalgam thereof'.<sup>43</sup>

Cohen is right in claiming that such a need exists. He may also be right to suggest that nationalism is one way of fulfilling this need, a need bound up with enduring features of human existence, the unavoidable contingencies of birth, suffering, bereavement and death.<sup>44</sup> If, however, he is suggesting that the need for identity explains the existence of national divisions, then such a view lends itself to the belief that nations are pregiven natural entities.

Ernest Gellner repudiates this myth. He argues that 'nations are not inscribed into the nature of things', nor are nation-states 'the manifest ultimate-destiny of ethnic or

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<sup>42</sup> G.A. Cohen, 'Reconsidering Historical Materialism', in J.R. Pennock and J.W. Chapman eds., *Marxism: Nomos XXVI* (New York, 1983), p.233.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.235.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, ch.1.

cultural groups'. But rather 'the crystallization of new units, suitable for the conditions now prevailing, though admittedly using as their raw material the cultural, historical and other inheritances from the prenationalist world'. The formation of a nation consists in 'the general imposition of a high cultural on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority'. This involves 'the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society' consisting of 'mutually substitutable, atomized individuals' bound together by 'a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technical communication'.<sup>45</sup>

Gellner thus emphasizes the historical novelty (the modernity of national identities) rather than their primordial character. Their formation is a consequence of 'the imperative of exo-socialization', by which he means 'the production and reproduction of men outside the local intimate unit' which formed the core of pre-modern societies. And 'exo-socialization' itself springs from the needs of industrial society for a homogeneous, socially mobile and educated population, in comparison with the stable hierarchies and fixed identities of agrarian societies.<sup>46</sup>

There are two difficulties with Gellner's analysis. The first lies in the concept of 'industrial society'. He characterizes modernity by the kind of technology used rather than the social relations prevailing within it. This leads Gellner to discover an immutable logic of industrialization governing all societies such that 'in the long run ... we shall be all affluent.'<sup>47</sup> Secondly, to explain nationalism by the 'imperative of exo-socialization' is to commit the functionalist fallacy. Its defects can partly be remedied by developing the distinction drawn by Giddens between 'class-divided societies' where surplus-extraction does not require the penetration of the everyday lives of the masses and capitalism where it does. But this modification does not meet the charge of functionalism. A satisfactory explanation of nationalism must involve an account of the

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<sup>45</sup> E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983), pp.49, 57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38; and see generally ch.3.

<sup>47</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Thought and Change* (London, 1964), p.118. See K. Kumar, *Prophecy and Progress* (Harmondsworth, 1978) for a discussion of the problematic of industrial society.

historical processes through which national identities replaced the old local unities.

The formation of nationality typically involves the incorporation of existing political and cultural units into the territory of a centralized and bureaucratic state and their forced assimilation to the culture usually of the class which dominates that state. In other words, nationalism is about the formation of nation-states. We now live in a world of such states.

Theda Skocpol writes that 'the state ... is fundamentally Janus-faced, with an intrinsically dual anchorage in class-divided socio-economic structures and an international system of states.' Thus 'the international state system as a transnational structure of military competition was not originally created by capitalism. Throughout modern world history, it represents an analytically autonomous level of transnational reality - interdependent in its structure and dynamics with world capitalism, but not reducible to it.'<sup>48</sup>

Giddens also makes a similar point. Michael Mann identifies four sources of social power, conceived as organizational means for achieving human objectives. These are ideological, economical, political and military relationships. One of Mann's chief contentions is that social theory should not concern itself with treating one of these sources as primary, explaining the others in terms of it, but rather with analysing the concrete ways in which the four kinds of social relationship interact within particular power-organizations.<sup>49</sup>

The most distinctive aspect of Mann's first volume is its stress on the importance of military power. Mann criticizes Marx because 'his general theory insisted on regarding militarism as parasitic and unproductive.' Mann offers a number of examples which show that this is not so. 'If militarism and states can be productive, their resulting forms may themselves causally determine further economic development, and so economic forms will also have military and political preconditions'.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> T. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge, 1979), pp.32, 22.

<sup>49</sup> M. Mann, *Sources*, ch.1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.222-3. See also chs. 5, 7 and 9.

For Weber, 'Processes of economic development are in the final analysis also power-struggles, and the ultimate and decisive interests at whose service economic policy must place itself are the interests of national power'.<sup>51</sup> Underlying such assertions is the ultimately Nietzschean claim that social relations are fundamentally relations of power: 'The structure of dominancy and its unfolding is decisive in determining the form of social action and its orientation toward a "goal"'.<sup>52</sup>

Mann's main reason for rejecting the classic Marxist and Weberian view of the state as 'the repository of physical force in society' is the following: 'Most historic states have not possessed a monopoly of organized military force and many have not even claimed it. The feudal state in some European countries in the Middle Ages depended on the feudal military levy controlled by decentralized lords. Islamic states generally lacked monopoly powers - for example, they did not see themselves as having power to intervene in tribal feuding. We can distinguish the political from the military powers of both states and other groups. Political powers are those of centralized, institutionalized, territorial regulation; military powers are those of organized physical force wherever they are organized'.<sup>53</sup>

This is more a difference in degree than in kind. Centralized territorial control is unlikely to get very far without the ability to back up state decisions with force. Equally, warfare among local notables is likely to be endemic unless some carve-up of territory is recongnized. Territorial regulation and military force go together, even if their conjunction does not entail the classic Weberian definition of the state as 'a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> M. Weber, 'The Nation-State and Economic Policy', *Economy and Society*, 9:4 (1980), p.438.

<sup>52</sup> M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley, 1978), p.941.

<sup>53</sup> Mann, *Sources*, p.11.

<sup>54</sup> H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills, *From Max Weber* (London, 1970), p.78. For an argument from the Libertarian right for the interdependence of territorial regulation and military power, see R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford, 1974), pp.16-17. See also J. Hall, *Powers and Liberties* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p.19, note 13.



## CHAPTER V

### OTHER SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES ?

The main thrust of the previous chapters has been to insist that human beings must be seen as agents, conscious actors moved by beliefs and desires. Structure represents the conditions of interaction; these 'conditions' are to be understood in an explanatory sense rather than a simply descriptive one in that they are necessarily involved in causal account of action.

Human action involves the exercise of structural capacities, the powers agents possess by virtue of their position in the relations of production, typically cannot be exercised by individual persons. Their exercise requires the construction of collectivities through which agents co-ordinate their actions on the basis of a recognized common identity. The relationship which structures have to such a collectivity is more than that of providing the immediate stimulus to common action which gives rise according to Sartre to the fused group, 'the danger of death, violence'. Their position within production relations provides class actors with the means to realize their objectives and consequently with an interest in acting collectively. Structures are thus continuously present in such collective action, rather than dissolved by it.

Frequently, engaging in collective action turns on a choice of social identities. At the same time, each identity is constituted by beliefs about the place in the social world that it involves, the relationships into which it is woven, the historical processes from which it has emerged. The ideology plays an indispensable role in forging social identities.

This chapter deals with specific authors who have suggested that in reality external and internal features of action are dialectically synthesized. But the main problem with this approach, as I argue, is that it mistakenly and unwittingly accords primacy to the productive capacities of individuals in the development and emergence of the 'conditions' under which they act. Hence, the effect is undercutting the idea of a preconstituted, non-reducible structure which represents the determinate conditions of existence of interaction. The notion of social structure is collapsed into the notion of the 'accomplishment' of active subjects. Such a position is reductionist in so far as the notion

of objective preconstituted structure is abandoned and, instead, the idea of an emergent structure continually made and remade by human agency is adopted.

Dawe, Giddens and Bourdieu locate as central to their interests the possibility of developing a theory or conception of human agency which will resolve the duality, preserve a sense of human creativity and purposive action, and account for the experience of the same.

### **The Retrieval of Human Agency**

Dawe's view has consistently been that the central tension in sociological thought is the conflict between the domination of the system and the exertion of human agency. Ultimately all the formulations, of the society: dual relationship, collectivism/holism-methodological individualism/atomism lead to an opposition between a sociology of social system and a sociology of social action. This tension occurs not merely in sociological inquiry but exists throughout western social, political, moral and creative thought and work, from philosophy and ethics to the novel and the film.<sup>1</sup> Dawe's reference point is the experience we have of the modern world as on the one hand that which constrains, oppresses, and determines us, and yet on the other as that context within which we choose and act purposefully. Sociology's representation takes the form of the sociology of social system and that of social action respectively. Dawe, however, situates this experience, and the representations of it within sociology, as a relatively contemporary event. The two sociologies are a response to a single fundamental problematic. That is, a specifically modern conception of man which emerges from the demise of medieval society.

The world view of medieval society was that the agency behind all things was divine creativity. There was no conception of man, a distinctive human nature, or agency. Dawe argues that with the development of the division of labour, the growth of towns, markets for goods and services, and significant changes in the nature and character of religious beliefs concomitant with the growth of Protestantism, a conception

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<sup>1</sup> A Dawe, 'Theories of Social Action' in T.B. Bottomore and R. Nisbet eds., *A History of Sociological Analysis* (Heinemann, 1979), p.364.

of a distinctively human agency began to emerge. Mobility, and the increasing achievement of roles and statuses, in contrast to their immutable ascription, meant that people began to conceive of themselves as active agents. In Dawe's terms, whereas 'God was at the centre of the medieval world; man is at the centre of the post-medieval world.'<sup>2</sup> However, his judgement is that sociological analysis has become a series of mutations on the notion of external constraint, and that in consequence autonomous human agency has disappeared from view. In discussing this disappearance Dawe alternates between references to the dominance of forms of instrumental rationality in social practice which negate the charismatic and creative force of human agency, and critical references to the direct contribution of sociology to programs of social intervention concomitant with the discipline's employment of a mechanistic, rationalistic, scientific method, a method which detracts from 'the essential autonomy, contingency, and creativity of human agency'.

Dawe's position is fundamentally based on the assumption that individuals' experiences of themselves as agents constitutes a sound basis for the discipline. The concept of human agency is thus grounded in people's experience. It is this experience of agency which Dawe sets up as the precondition of sociology. Human agency is to be retrieved and preserved in the face of sociology's 'obsolete and imperious scientific pretension, which cuts us off from the world of which we are also members'.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, therefore, Dawe's analysis is prescriptive, advocating yet another form of sociological analysis, in which the metaphor of the conversation has a central place. The relevance and value of this particular metaphor is that it signifies human agency, an active relationship with the world about us, where individuals, whether professional or 'lay' sociologists, are considered to be 'in conversation with the life around them ... articulating the experience they both watched and lived'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A. Dawe, 'Theories of Social Action' in T.B. Bottomore and R. Nisbet eds., *A History of Sociological Analysis* (Heinemann, 1979), p.377.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.409.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.410.

There are several limitations to Dawe's position. There are two most fundamental weaknesses, beginning with his formulation of a preferred sociology, a sociology employing the metaphor of the conversation. Completely absent from his conception of another sociology is any consideration of the rules of formation for making statements within a specific discursive system, the rules which allow for certain statements about the social world to be formulated. Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Parsons, and all the other potential founding authors of sociology were not independently 'in conversation' with the social world around them. They produced statements, writing within the discourse of sociology. Such statements therefore were not the product of these individuals' transparent experiences of the world. Rather their analyses represent an ordering of representations (of the life, labour, and language of human beings), subject to specific rules of formation which give their works value and coherence as forms of knowledge.

The second major weakness in Dawe's analysis concerns the presence in the text of two contradictory sets of statements. On the one hand there are statements which refer to the historical specificity of the origin of human agency and to its subsequent negation. On the other hand there are unsubstantiated statements concerning the value of human agency and the possibility of its retrieval. In reacting merely with disapproval to the predominance of a sociology which contributes to the demise of human agency, Dawe has no analytic resources on which to draw. At best his analysis allows only for an acknowledgement of the tension central to sociological inquiry and the human sciences in general. That is, between the domination of the system and the expression of human agency. Without doubt there is no analytical warrant for emphasizing active, creative, autonomous human agency, particularly when the force of the Weberian analysis of the historical dissolution of agency is so readily acknowledged. The criticisms are not levelled at Dawe's 'politics of the individual', but rather at the assumption central to his position of an autonomous, creative, human agency, and also at the presumption that it is possible to construct another sociology on this basis.

### **The Theory of Structuration**

Giddens begins from much the same point as Dawe, with a concern that the

human sciences, and sociology in particular, lacks a theory of action. Thereafter, however, Giddens' remedy is more complex, his analysis broader in conception, and his conclusions more controversial and significant. Sociology is characterized as tending towards determinism. Giddens argues that it has concerned itself with revealing that which is hidden to, informing, and determining of social actors and has in consequence ignored a class of phenomena central to human conduct. It is suggested that if this deficiency is to be remedied the philosophy of action and the sociological conceptions of structure and system are in need of reformulation. Through such a process of reformulation the traditional dualisms, of individual and society (or subject and object), and that of conscious/unconscious modes of cognition may be resolved, into what Giddens terms his theory of structuration. In place of these sociological dualisms the theory of structuration substitutes the notion of a *duality* of structure, that is to say 'structure is both the medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices,' and a logically necessary feature of this conception is that 'all social agents are knowledgeable about the social systems which they constitute and reproduce in their action'.<sup>5</sup> Giddens is seeking here to compensate for a deficiency in the predominant sociological paradigms<sup>6</sup> to affirm the concept of human agency<sup>7</sup> and thereby to challenge the structuralist tendency to reduce man to an epiphenomenon of structure. His view is that 'a recovery of the subject without lapsing into subjectivism' is necessary. For the quite warranted criticism and rejection of the reliability of consciousness, as 'transparent to itself,' has produced the unwarranted disappearance, or 'subordination to structure,' of the reflexive components of human conduct.

The theory of the subject developed by Giddens involves three sets of relations: (1) the unconscious; (2) practical consciousness; (3) discursive consciousness. Of these

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<sup>5</sup> A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London, 1979), p.5.

<sup>6</sup> They neglect, ignore, or, worse, deny social actors' knowledge about the preconditions of the reproduction of the society.

<sup>7</sup> Agents produce and reproduce structures, even if in unintended forms and with unintended consequences.

three the second is of major significance to the theory of structuration. By practical consciousness Giddens means the knowledge actors draw upon in social activity, the knowledge that enables them to know 'how to do' and 'how to be'. This kind of consciousness is distinguished both from discursive consciousness<sup>8</sup> and from the unconscious.<sup>9</sup> Human agency in Giddens' terms cannot then be defined through reasons and intentions. It is considered to be logically prior to a subject-object differentiation. Intentionality is a routine feature of human action, but it only becomes apparent in discourse, and then imperfectly, through reflexive monitoring, which itself draws upon the tacit knowledge inherent in practical consciousness.

Although the concept of practical consciousness is a critical component in Giddens' theory of structuration, the concept of the unconscious is no less important, for it is essential to a theory of the subject 'posed in developmental terms'. To work out a theory of the subject Giddens resorts selectively to the reading of Freud offered by Lacan, stressing the significance of the linking of the emergence of 'I' 'with basic features of language as 'Other'. However, although Lacan may provide an interesting conception of the emergence of the subject through language, his work is found wanting, insofar as it is unable to address the organic foundations of human motivation which represent the first stimulus for the child's contact with the social and material worlds. Hence, Giddens argues that even if the emergence of the subject, the child's becoming a 'positioned subject,' is a precondition for the reflexive monitoring of action: 'there are nonetheless a range of competencies which precede that development, as one type of condition necessary for its accomplishment: such competencies may be plausibly supposed to be connected to contemporaneous processes in the formation of the basic security system. Human biology, not unsurprisingly, may be the immediate basis of such connections'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Involving knowledge expressed in discourse, what actors formulate in speech as reasons for activities.

<sup>9</sup> Itself acknowledged to be an important element in action, and as essential to a theory of the subject.

<sup>10</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems* (London, 1979), p.123.

Being invoked here is the body and its organic wants, as that which is responsible for the child's first and most all-encompassing accommodations to the world. Significantly, one may conclude from this that from the outset the human being is subjected to coercions that act upon its body, subjected 'to a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the very process of formation or emergence of the subject, of human agency is one in which society structure, institutions, not only positions the subject through which language but, in addition, achieves a social and political investment of the body. Therefore, the logic of Giddens' comments on the question of the emergence of the subject, or human agency, is that the subject is constituted through language, and through the unconscious accommodation or adaptation of the body and its desires to the social and material world. In other words, human agency is a produced reality.

Giddens' pursuit of a theory of action requires an adequate theory of the subject, a 'recovery of the subject' in fact, and this 'involves a grasp of "what cannot be said" (or thought) as practice'.<sup>12</sup> Hence the significance of the concepts of the unconscious and practical consciousness to this theory of the subject. Action involves intervention, or its contemplation, by human agents who draw upon rules (knowledge) and resources (means or media for the employment of transformative capacity). Yet, although human agency is credited with considerable knowledge of the institutions of society, the consequences of action remain uncertain, subject to chance, or the play of events. Furthermore, despite human agency's capacity for reflexively monitoring conduct, the unconscious motivations for action remain obscure. The elements of practical consciousness and the stocks of tacit knowledge it draws upon are only partially and imperfectly brought to light by such monitoring. The necessary admission in Giddens' analysis of this dark side to human agency suggests that the dualisms of subject and object and conscious and unconscious modes of cognition have not been transcended. As a consequence of his conception of structuralism's dissolution of human agency, Giddens

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<sup>11</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, 1977), p.138.

<sup>12</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems* (London, 1979), p.44.

over-emphasizes the purposive subject and generally neglects to consider its origins as 'lived experience,' or as a concept within the human sciences. With respect to these two points there is a clear contrast with the work of Foucault who locates the possibility of the experience and the emergence of the concept of human agency within the context of a series of historical events.

### **The Dark Side of Human Agency**

Given that there are aspects of the conditions of reproduction of society of which every social actor will know very little; that actors can only act within the parameters of historically located modes of activity, and then their actions are subject to unintended consequences; and that society intrudes, or intervenes, within human agency in the form of unconscious motivations for action, formed through the rendering social of the body and its desires, and through the constitution of specific stocks of knowledge, which actors draw upon 'unconsciously' to produce and reproduce their actions, as well as attempt to consciously formulate in discourse in order to account for their actions, then it is warranted to consider human agency as heavily circumscribed. If one abandons Giddens' specific beginning, namely an assumption of human agency, or a concern to 'recover the subject,' then much of what he states makes problematic the status of human agency and authorizes analysis of its construction or production.

Foucault's work is concerned with the production or construction of the subject in contrast to the necessary assumption of its existence as within humanism. There are two important respects in which Foucault's work may be read as indirectly addressing issues central to a sociological theory of action. These are Foucault's conception of a non-correspondence between programs of social intervention and their historical effects and a possible paradox, namely Foucault's references to human resistance.

Whereas for the theorist of human agency and action the unintended consequences of activity represent a problem,<sup>13</sup> for Foucault the issue is transformed into a non-problem or is conceptualized in a very different form. Specifically, it is conceived in

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<sup>13</sup> For explanation of such consequences must rest outside of a conception of human agency or the subject.



terms of a necessary relationship of non-correspondence between discourses, which allow for the construction of programs for the formation of a social reality and their practical historical effects. In other words, we may 'live in a world of programmes, but the world does not follow a programme'.<sup>14</sup> Proceeding in this way analysis does not confront a dark zone of unintended consequences. Rather it is free to pursue the course by which a specific program of intervention produces specific unprogrammed effects. The second respect in which Foucault's work bears upon action theory is in his postulation of human resistance to programs and technologies. This is more controversial. For Foucault offers little in the way of analysis to deepen our understanding of the concept of resistance, its sources, or forms. It might be argued that resistance is itself beyond formulation, that once formulated, by or within a program, it becomes normalized and is therefore no longer resistance. In Foucault's terms resistance is: 'something which in some way escapes the relations of power; something in the social body, in the classes, in the groups, in the individuals themselves which is not at all the more or less docile or reactive raw material, but which is the centrifugal movement, the inverse energy, that which escapes'.<sup>15</sup>

Resistance therefore exists in bodies and souls, in individuals and in classes, but in diverse forms. It is not that resistance lies outside of power relations; rather, it represents their limit. In fact, Foucault's concept of resistance is an enigma. Very simply, where there is power there is always resistance, that is to say, resistances are always already implicated in power relations. Power produces resistance. As such, therefore, resistance has no specific sociological reality, there is no 'single locus of great Refusal,' no fount of all rebellions.<sup>16</sup> The implication in Foucault's references to resistance is that the system of discipline or normalization, the programs and

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<sup>14</sup> C. Gordon, 'Other Inquisitions', in P. Foss & P. Patten, *Ideology and consciousness*, 8 (1981), pp.35-9.

<sup>15</sup> M. Morris and P. Patton (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth and Strategy* (Sydney, 1979), p.52.

<sup>16</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1: An Introduction (London, 1979), p.96.

technologies, operate or are exercised upon an inherently resistant human material. Although this does not represent an oblique reference to creative, autonomous human agency it clearly indicates that Foucault's conception of society is not that of a subjected totality populated by docile individuals. Rebellion occurs, domination is resisted. As Foucault states, 'points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network'.<sup>17</sup> Foucault's work is 'pessimistic' because its central preoccupation with historical forms of rationality necessitates a concentration on forms of domination and a consequent neglect of forms of resistance.

If we accept the view advanced by Giddens, that we should be doing something about the possible 'end of the individual... swamped by a spreading totalitarianism,' then the conception of human agency as a problem assumes not only an analytic significance, but in addition becomes a critical political issue. At risk is the question of the individual's and, more significantly, the collective's ability to exercise some degree of control over their respective destinies. This is a vital issue for it represents the sole context within which an effective consideration of directed, intentional, social and political change may occur. On the other side of this issue we find the subordination of the subject, human agency, to the play of autonomous or quasi-autonomous social forces. Ultimately the adoption of this position renders problematic the question of the formulation of strategies necessary for the institution of novel or contextually different social forms and practices.

The contradiction at the heart of the project to 'recover the subject,' or to 'retrieve human agency' from the grip of structure is that in the very attempt to make out a case for the subject, for human agency, structure is invoked to account for the emergence or constitution of the subject/agent. Furthermore, the 'dark side' of human agency receives short shrift. The problems - of the unintended consequences of action; the structuring of the unconscious; and the possible demise of human agency through what Weber terms the 'ever-widening grasp of discipline' the process through which

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<sup>17</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1 : An Introduction (London, 1979), p.95.

'discipline substitutes habituation to routinized skill'<sup>18</sup> - are generally given little serious consideration. No constructive argument is offered to counter the Weberian view that the institutionalization of instrumental rationality ensures the negation of human agency.

Giddens's main interest is in resolving and reconciling two equally valid strands in social theory. The first stems from the traditions of interpretive sociology<sup>19</sup> out of which one can pull a model of the human actor as a skilled and reflexive being who in some way is involved in the constitution of social reality. The second stems from the more conventional lineages of modern sociology<sup>20</sup> which concentrate on problems of institutional analysis and social change. Each of these traditions emphasizes its own set of problems at the expense of those of the other. Giddens attempts to bring these two strands together in terms of certain distinctions: first there is the distinction between 'practices' and 'structures'. 'Practices are the situated doings of a subject, can be examined with regard to intended outcomes, and may involve an orientation towards securing a response or range of responses from another or others; structures, on the other hand, have no specific socio-temporal location, are characterized by the "absence of a subject" and cannot be framed in terms of a subject-object dialectic'.<sup>21</sup>

Giddens states that this notion of 'structure' is not necessarily inculcated in what he takes to be the failings of both structuralism<sup>22</sup> and functionalism, in which the term 'structure' appears on numerous occasions. The main failing of these is that they do not come to terms with 'the constitution of social life as the production of active subjects'.<sup>23</sup> The terms 'structuration' and 'reproduction' are also important terms. The idea of the reproduction of structures 'refers to the process by which structures maintain their

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<sup>18</sup> Max Weber on 'The Meaning of Discipline', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* eds., H.H. Gerth and C.Wright Mills (London, 1970), p.254.

<sup>19</sup> Existential phenomenology, ethnomethodology, etc.

<sup>20</sup> Durkheim, Marx, Parsons.

<sup>21</sup> Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (London, 1976), p.119.

<sup>22</sup> Exemplified in the work of Levi-Strauss.

<sup>23</sup> Giddens, *New Rules* (London, 1976), p.120.

structural identity over time and is essentially the reconceptualized problem of homeostasis in functional analysis. The concept of structuration 'refers abstractly to the dynamic process whereby structures come into being', and thus to study the process of reproduction is 'to specify the connections between structuration and structure'. It is through the use of these (and other) concepts that Giddens attempts to overcome the pitfalls of both voluntaristic and deterministic schools of social theory. 'The characteristic error of the philosophy of action is to treat the problem of 'production' only, thus not developing any concept of structural analysis at all; the limitation of both structuralism and functionalism, on the other hand is to regard 'reproduction' as a mechanical outcome, rather than an active-contributing process, accomplished by, and consisting in, the doings of active subjects'.<sup>24</sup>

Giddens attempts to wed the notion of 'production' to 'reproduction' through the notion of the 'duality of structure' by which he means that 'social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution'. Thus, for Giddens, 'the proper locus for the study of social reproduction is in the immediate process of the constituting of interaction', and, therefore, 'this is why there is a definite point to the analysis of 'every day life' as a phenomenon of the totality'.

But Giddens's treatment of production and reproduction and the concept of structure have certain drawbacks. First of all, Giddens's use of the concept of structure. Giddens insists that 'structure' should refer to 'rules and resources' which are 'properties of social systems' and which are 'recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems'. Giddens says that structures as 'rules and resources' must be distinguished from 'social systems' which are essentially 'reproduced' and 'regular social practices'. The main 'reason' for this distinction is that functionalists have characteristically used the terms structure and system virtually synonymously, as referring to a 'discernible pattern of surface particulars'<sup>25</sup> or as having the connotation of 'visible pattern'.<sup>26</sup> For

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<sup>24</sup> Giddens, *New Rules* (London, 1976), p.121.

<sup>25</sup> Giddens, *Studies in Social and Political Theory* (London, 1977), p.113.

Giddens, these meanings or senses must be carried strictly by the term system itself, whilst the term structure must be used in an 'explanatory' way in the sense that underlying or deep structures are held to explain surface appearances.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, in Giddens's scheme, the notion of structure has more in common with structuralist images of the term than with functionalist usages which tend both to conflate structure and system at the same time as using them as referring to a visible pattern of surface particulars. However, Giddens's usage of the term structure departs from typical structuralist usages in that his does not imply 'Levi-Strauss's view that structures are simply models posited by the observer'<sup>28</sup> Instead, Giddens's notion of structure refers to real entities but which are 'temporally "present" only in their instantiation'.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Giddens states that 'structures do not exist in time-space, except in the moments of the constitution of social systems'. This is where the concept of structuration comes in and focuses upon the ways in which structures are produced and reproduced by human subjects 'in the immediate process of the constituting of interaction'. Thus, Giddens says: 'There is no structure in human social life, apart from the continuity of processes of structuration', and, 'It is essential to recognize that structures only exist as the reproduced conduct of situated actors with definite intentions and interests'.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the fact of Giddens's insistence that structures only exist in their instantiation in particular pieces of interaction and that structuration is inherent in the immediate process of the constituting of interaction, he nowhere gives empirical examples of these processes, and therefore it is difficult to know how these theoretical statements actually explain concrete instances of interaction. It is in this sense that Giddens's analysis suffers from its purely philosophical level of analysis. It is necessary to

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<sup>26</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems* (London, 1979), p.64.

<sup>27</sup> Giddens, *Studies in Social and Political Theory* (London, 1977), p.112.

<sup>28</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems* (London, 1979), p.64.

<sup>29</sup> This seems to mean that structures only exist at the point when they are produced and reproduced by actors in concrete instances of interaction.

<sup>30</sup> Giddens, *New Rules* (London, 1976), p.118.

understand the effects of severing the notion of 'structure', defined as rules and resources, from 'system', defined as reproduced social relations. There are two points here: first, to talk of rules and resources as somehow disembodied and separate from reproduced social relations is a false separation. Second, to make structure (defined as rules and resources) carry the meaning or explanatory sense of unobserved underlying mechanisms<sup>31</sup> which generate surface appearances, whilst system carries the descriptive sense of a visible pattern of social relations, is to obscure the nature of social rules and social relations. For example, to define reproduced social relations as given observable patterns denies the sense in which social relations cannot be thought of in this way. Marx's example of the way in which commodity fetishism obscures the exploitative nature of the social relations of production is but one way in which social relations are not simply 'given' to social analysts in their descriptions of social reality. The way in which social relations or classifications of social relations are conceived depends upon (a) a penetration below<sup>32</sup> the surface particulars of social relations, to expose the mechanisms which underly their surface manifestations, and (b) a theoretical mechanism which is able to explain the relation between the 'surface' and the 'deeper' aspects.<sup>33</sup> In this sense 'social relations' are of a dual nature in so far as they imply both observable manifestations and an underlying explanatory mechanism which explains why they are what they are and what is their nature.

Similarly, to conceive of social rules and resources as essentially unobservable and only present in their instantiation is to obscure the fact that rules have an enduring substantive content. Rules and resources cannot be treated as abstract 'sets' existing in a social vacuum outside of space and time except in a quite special analytic sense which disconnects the notion of rules from actual rule governed conduct and thus action itself.

Giddens's exclusive concern with the formal properties of rules, and such issues as what it means to 'follow a rule' or 'to know a rule' or to 'know how to formulate

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<sup>31</sup> Be they conceived in a realist or nominalist sense.

<sup>32</sup> To some extent ideologically constructed.

<sup>33</sup> See P.Hirst, *Social Evolution and Social Categories* (London, 1976).

rules<sup>34</sup> diverts attention away from the fact that rules can never be just rules, they are always rules about something. That is, they always have a substantive content which is in turn informed by a particular kind of social-relational context. In this sense, social rules operate and exist at different levels of abstraction, observability and codifiability, for example, the formal rules inherent in an authority hierarchy in a bureaucratic organization as compared with the informal and unspoken rules required by engagement in polite conversation, or the 'ground rules' of public order in everyday life.<sup>35</sup> To speak of rules and resources in an abstract way<sup>36</sup> is to ignore the inherent and enduring substantive contents of rules and thus to falsely separate them from the social contexts which inform them.

To summarize, to define reproduced social relations as observable patterns is to obscure the fact that hidden relations of power and domination may operate as prior structuring conditions of the observable manifestations, just as to define rules and resources as unobservable and generative is to obscure the fact that they have substantive contents, and that such contents are informed by particular social contexts. Thus the dimensions of observability/unobservability and explanatory/descriptive structures are inseparable from the more general question of whether it is possible to treat rules and resources as isolatable from reproduced social relations. Such a separation is unhelpful in the study of social interaction since it is necessarily just as implicated in the idea of reproduced relations as it is in the notion of rules and resources. Further, both must be regarded as part and parcel of the preconstituted conditions of action. The problem for Giddens lies in just this: his intention of avoiding any notion of structure as preconstituted (and thus breaking with the idea that structure is constituted by individual subjects) means that reproduced relations cannot be admitted to the definition of structure. To do so would be to contradict the idea that structures only exist in their

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<sup>34</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems* (London, 1979), pp.65-9.

<sup>35</sup> See E. Goffman, *Relations in Public* (Harmondsworth, 1972).

<sup>36</sup> As does Giddens to accord with his notion of structure as unobservable and generative.

instantiation, since to talk of reproduced relations implies structures of social relationships which endure (exist) over time.

The effect of the severance of reproduced relations from the notion of structure is to by-pass the problem of investigating the prior conditions of interaction. Thus, in Giddens's formulation, structure is identified with the doings or productions of interactants (instantiated rules and resources), and therefore can tell us nothing about the way in which reproduced relations create constraints and define levels of freedom in interaction. In sum, in Giddens's scheme there is no room for the analysis of how prior (preconstituted) structures of power and domination exert a structuring effect on interaction, since structure cannot be conceived outside of the realm of human agency. There is an assumption built into Giddens's analysis that to talk of the autonomous structuring properties of structure in this way is to opt for a deterministic, mechanical theory which would leave no room for the creative element in human social interaction.

Another important consequence of the way in which Giddens conceptualizes structure can be seen in relation to the way he utilizes the notion of 'power'. Clegg has provided a detailed critique of this. Clegg's main complaint with Giddens's schema is that 'despite the talk of structures and structuration, the whole basis of the schema is *individualist* and *voluntarist*'<sup>37</sup> and that 'he [Giddens] does not appear to realize the contradictions inherent in taking a concept of social action as *foundational* for a concept of social structure'.<sup>38</sup> Thus, for Clegg: 'the "intentions" or "wants" of the actor cannot be assumed to be a secure basis for the presumption of analysis into power, because they cannot be constituted independently of broader, structural aspects of power phenomena - such as domination - unless one makes the mistake of theorizing these as conceptually generated from this level in the first place.'<sup>39</sup>

Instead, for Clegg, one must have an analysis of power which can theorize prior

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<sup>37</sup> S.Clegg, *The Theory of Power and Organization* (London, 1979), p.73.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.72-3.



structures of domination (as in Poulantzas)<sup>40</sup> which cannot be reduced to a voluntaristic analysis in which the acting subject creates and chooses the 'conditions' under which he operates, thus, 'One cannot choose what dominates one, other than through concerted class praxis as a revolutionary way of reformulating dominance'. Clegg goes on to criticize both Giddens and Lukes<sup>41</sup> for achieving: 'their synthesis of 'power' and 'structure' through making their theoretical movement from the level of appearances as given. Each treats this 'market-place' of power-relations, the moment of exchange as fundamental to the analysis of social structure without realizing that this is rather like treating money simply in its obvious form as a circulatory medium, its appearance, without relating its appearance to that which makes it possible: value.<sup>42</sup> It is to move from the concrete to the abstract, rather than from the abstract to the concrete. It is to leave the relationship between acting human subjects and the possibilities of their exercise, or having of power as untheorized'.<sup>43</sup>

Such a criticism points to the empiricist leanings of analyses which have no theoretical formulation of the concept of domination in and as a structure, which functions as the prior conditions of interaction and the exercise of power. On the specific question of theoretically accounting for interaction, it is not enough to replace one ontology with another. That is, to substitute the ontological domain of interaction which necessarily involves and engages the analysis of the self-monitoring and skilled 'accomplishments' of the actors for the ontological domain of prior structures of domination which cannot be reduced to actors' accomplishments in routine interaction. To adopt exclusive ontological and epistemological commitments to the domain of prior structures of domination would be to court the same kind of mechanical structural determinism of interaction as in functionalism. However, to accede the existence and importance of such a domain in the structuring of interaction does not necessarily lead

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<sup>40</sup> See N.Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London, 1973).

<sup>41</sup> See S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London, 1974).

<sup>42</sup> K.Marx, *Capital I* (Harmondsworth, 1976), Chs III and V.

<sup>43</sup> S. Clegg, *The Theory of Power and Organization* (London, 1979), p.74.

to a theory of interaction as the mechanical outcome of an unmodulated structural determinism. In fact, a theory of interaction should emphasize the crucial importance of both the idea of prior structures of domination and the relatively autonomous accomplishments of social actors.

Contextual structures of interaction represent preconstituted structures of domination and act as the prior conditions of interaction. The idea of contextual structure in a sense conflates Giddens's distinction between structure and system by suggesting that the prior contextual conditions of interaction are a fusion of reproduced social relations, rules and resources, and the structures of power and domination that underlie and are inherent in all these elements. There are two principal types of contextual structures: 'formal' and 'substantive'. The formal refers to non-specific constraints and facilities whilst the substantive refers to more specific constraints and facilities which crystallize around socially structured 'sites' of interaction.

Leaving aside the question of structure there are a few other points about Giddens's formulations. First, there is the question of the 'knowledgeability' of social actors. Giddens states that a theory which emphasizes that 'institutions work "behind the backs" of the social actors who produce and reproduce them', and which thus discounts 'agents' 'reasons' for their action, 'is not only defective from the point of view of social theory, it is one with strongly-defined and potentially offensive political implications. It implies a *'derogation of the lay actor'*.<sup>44</sup> Now in so far as this criticism relates to theories which operate with an unbridled structural determinism, such that actors are viewed as 'cultural dopes' (functionalism) or 'bearers' of structural constraints (various brands of Marxism, then Giddens is correct. However, to suggest that institutions in some sense operate beyond the control (behind the backs) of social actors is not necessarily to endorse an exclusive structural determination vis-a-vis interaction. There is no reason to suppose that to admit of the operation of structures beyond the knowledge and control of actors in their routine interactions necessarily implies that social actors are 'cultural dopes'. However, to suggest, that actors are always knowledgeable in the practical or discursive sense about the workings of society to the extent that they

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<sup>44</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems* (London, 1979), p.71.

'produce' (via duality of structure) society<sup>45</sup> commits the opposite mistake of the structural determinists in that it elevates and exaggerates the importance of the lay actor's control of his or her social destiny (conditions of existence) via their presumed knowledgeable of these conditions. Now, whilst it may be true to say that lay actors in the routine vicissitudes of social life must be knowledgeable in some, particularly the practical, sense, otherwise they would be incompetent members of society ('real' as opposed to 'cultural' morons, or dopes), this does not require us to say that they are all equally knowledgeable (in whatever sense) nor, more importantly, does it require us to say that such knowledge enables lay actors to control or produce the conditions of their existence. The whole question of what is meant by knowledge here is problematic. It suffices to say that a theory of interaction which takes into account the way in which the structural features of society constrain interaction in some sense independently of the volition and knowledge of the actors involved is not to be confused with the extremist, 'methodological tactic... of discounting agents' reasons for their action'<sup>46</sup>

The second theme related to the 'theory of action' really involves two connected claims; first, the claim that the social sciences lack a theory of action which acknowledges the importance of the self-monitoring capacities of actors, and second, that 'time-space relations', which are 'inherent in the constitution of all social interaction' have been repressed in social theory as an 'inevitable outcome of the maintenance of the the distinctions between synchrony and diachrony, or statics and dynamics'.<sup>47</sup> What these two claims reveal is a fairly narrow conception of social science, since, if one looks at symbolic interactionism, or ethnomethodology, or some humanistic or phenomenological variant of either, Giddens's two claims are not borne out. Nowhere does Giddens discuss symbolic interactionism as a school of thought in its own right. He does 'mention' the work of G.H. Mead but the discussion of Mead is limited to his concepts of the 'I' and the 'me' or a dismissal of Mead's work because his treatment of

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<sup>45</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems* (London, 1979), p.250.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

society 'was rudimentary'.<sup>48</sup> In this way, Giddens manages to avoid a veritable wealth of material by subsequent symbolic interactionists who have gone on to develop a conceptual and theoretical armoury far in advance of Mead's original ideas.

Not only does this work represent a quite elaborate theoretical approach to interaction<sup>49</sup> within social science but certain sections of it also highlight a concern with time-space relations. Glaser and Strauss,<sup>50</sup> in particular, have been concerned with the spatial and temporal features of social organization and interaction. Even if one is critical of the symbolic interactionists' theoretical approach to interaction it is not true to say that their theories or those of ethnomethodologists suppress time-space relations. Giddens, in fact, is partly aware that there are writers who have considered the temporal-spatial features of interaction when he discusses the work of Goffman.<sup>51</sup> However, Giddens does not locate Goffman<sup>52</sup> in any particular theoretical tradition and thus does not raise the question of why it is that time-space relations are not suppressed in Goffman's work.

It is precisely because the statics/dynamics distinction is rejected in the work of the symbolic interactionists that time-space relations are not suppressed in their work. In fact, symbolic interactionist ideas about the emergent and developmental quality of social 'structures'<sup>53</sup> are very much in line with Giddens's theory of structuration, and consequently suffer from similar limitations. For example, Glaser and Strauss's ideas about 'structural process' bear many close resemblances to Giddens's ideas about the duality of structure. The important deficiencies in these analyses is not the suppression of time-space relations, but an inadequate conceptualization of the relationship between

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<sup>48</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems* (London, 1979), p.254.

<sup>49</sup> See G. McCall and J. Simmons, *Identities and Interactions* (New York, 1966).

<sup>50</sup> See B. Glaser and A. Strauss, 'Time, Structural Process and Status Passage: The Case of dying in D. Field ed., *Social Psychology for Sociologists* (London, 1974).

<sup>51</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems* (London, 1979), pp.207-8.

<sup>52</sup> Who has definite affinities with both symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology.

<sup>53</sup> See Paul Rock, *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism* (London, 1979).

routine interaction (including its spatial/temporal features) and the more general processes of production and reproduction of structure.

### **Bourdieu's Theory of Practice**

Like Giddens, Bourdieu attempts to come to terms with two dominant traditions of social theory (structuralism and phenomenology). However, there are some quite distinct differences in the two approaches.

Bourdieu begins with the observation that the social world may be the object of three modes of theoretical knowledge: phenomenological, objectivist and dialectical. Phenomenological (including ethnomethodological) knowledge attempts to apprehend the world of primary experience, the lived experience of human actors, whilst objectivist knowledge constructs the objective relations (for example, economic or linguistic) which structure the practice and primary experience of actors. That is, objectivist knowledge breaks with the kind of primary knowledge which imputes to the world a self-evident, natural character. Dialectical knowledge goes a step further than this and breaks with objectivist knowledge itself and inquires into the conditions of its own possibility. That is, dialectical knowledge must break from the limits of the objective standpoint 'which grasps practices from the outside, as a *fait accompli*, instead of constructing their generative principle within the very moment of their accomplishment' and thus 'make possible a science of dialectical relations between the objective structures to which the objectivist mode of knowledge gives access and the structured dispositions within which these structures are actualized and which tend to reproduce them'. In other words, the dialectical mode of knowledge would attempt to show how the objective relations are continually actualized and reproduced at the phenomenological level, that is, the level of subjective relations. Thus Bourdieu's project is to attempt a synthesis between objectivist and phenomenological modes of knowledge.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Such an attempt is not new and was the central aim of Berger and Luckmann (1971), first published in 1966, although Bourdieu makes no mention of it. For Berger and Luckmann 'society exists as both objective and subjective reality' and thus they feel that 'these aspects receive their proper recognition if society is  
(continued...)

This dialectical synthesis is necessary for Bourdieu because otherwise analysis will fall prey to the excesses and errors of structuralism and/or ethnomethodology. As far as structuralism is concerned, there are two principal weaknesses. First, there are the questions of reification and realism. Structuralist writers such as Levi-Strauss have followed Durkheim in this respect in ascribing a transcendent, permanent and a-historical existence to all collective 'realities'.<sup>55</sup> That is, they have tended to speak as if structures had an existence independent of the active intervention (or doings) of human subjects, and thus have largely abrogated the necessity of accounting for how these structures are actualized and reproduced in time through the activities of subjects. As a corollary to this the structuralists operate with a mechanical model of action, as if it were a determinant function of the transcendent structures: "It is necessary to abandon all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of pre-established assemblies, 'models' or 'roles'."<sup>56</sup>

Phenomenology, on the other hand, tends to engage in a form of reductionism whereby objective structures are reduced to situated, interactional determinants: " 'interpersonal' relations are never, except in appearance, *individual-to-individual* relationships... the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction. This is what social psychology and interactionism or ethnomethodology forget when, reducing the objective structure of the relationship between the assembled individuals to the conjunctural structure of their interaction in a particular situation or group...", : and

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<sup>54</sup>(...continued)

understood in terms of an ongoing dialectical process composed of the three moments of externalization, objectivation and internalization': P.Berger and T.Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p.149. It is instructive to compare this with Bourdieu's attempt to establish a 'science of the dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality, or, more simply, of incorporation and objectification: P.Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (London, 1977), p.72.

<sup>55</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), p.27.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73.

again: "to describe the process of objectification and orchestration in the language of *interaction* and mutual adjustment is to forget that the interaction itself owes its form to the objective structures which have produced the dispositions of the interacting agents and which allot their relative positions in the interaction and elsewhere."<sup>57</sup>

As a 'middle-way' between the reification and realism of structuralism and the reductionism of phenomenology, Bourdieu proposes a threefold distinction between structures, habitus and practices. Structures and practices refer respectively to the objective conditions of action, and the actual interactional doings (or practices) of human beings, whilst habitus represents the key dialectical integrative mechanism that mediates between the two. It is through the habitus that structures govern practice, and habitus itself is defined as 'systems of durable transposable *dispositions*', that is, cognitive motivating structures, tendencies or propensities which in turn reproduce the structures by actual incorporation into the practices (interaction, activities) of human beings. Thus, for example, membership of a particular social class (structure) confers certain objectively conditioned and defined dispositions (habitus) such as ways of perceiving and conceiving which are incorporated into the interactions of actual class members, and thus over time tend to reinforce and reproduce the objective conditions of their practice.

In his efforts to avoid the pitfalls of structuralism and phenomenology, Bourdieu's statements on the precise relation between habitus and the structures and practices which it mediates tend to be particularly opaque. Bourdieu wants to avoid both a mechanistic theory of action<sup>58</sup> at the same time as maintaining a view of objective structures as 'transcending subjective intentions and conscious projects whether individual or collective'.<sup>59</sup> He attempts to do this by claiming that practices cannot be deduced from their objective conditions: 'these practices can be accounted for only by relating the objective *structure* defining the social conditions of the production of the habitus which engendered them to the conditions in which this habitus is operating, that is to the

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<sup>57</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), p.81.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

*conjuncture* which short of a radical transformation, represents a particular state of this structure'.<sup>60</sup>

The habitus thus, being 'the generative principle of *regulated improvisations*' performs a dual role of allowing for, but simultaneously limiting, the creativity of human action in particular situations. This dual propensity is fashioned by the distinction between general and specific conditions of action as represented by the terms objective structure and 'the conjuncture' which 'represents a particular state of this structure'. This means that whilst the objective structure sets the limits of action (what is possible), the specific 'conjuncture' (read: situation in which action is occurring) is responsible for engendering a degree of creativity via the specific conditions of actions but which are strictly delimited by the objective conditions, thus; 'the conditioned and conditional freedom it (the habitus) secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings'.<sup>61</sup>

It is obvious that there is a lot in common between Giddens's and Bourdieu's accounts, although Bourdieu is not concerned with the active subject to the same degree and is rather more interested in the specific conjuncture of the action. Nevertheless, there is a very great similarity in terms of the simultaneity model of production and reproduction in so far as human subjects are ultimately the loci of such processes. For example, Giddens's contention that 'every act of reproduction is *ipso facto* an act of production, in which society is created afresh in a novel set of circumstances' very closely mirrors Bourdieu's assertion that 'Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy-nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning'.<sup>62</sup> Thus, for both Giddens and Bourdieu, 'objective' structures are ultimately dependent upon the doings of skilled interactants, whilst at the same time both authors wish to be free of the charge of subjectivism. That is, they attempt to reconcile the view that objective structures cannot

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<sup>60</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), p.78.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.79.



exist outside of interaction<sup>63</sup> with the view that they cannot be reduced to the subjective intentions of the interactants. The claim is that the objective structures are both outside and determinative of interaction, whilst at the same time are the internally generated outcome of such interactions. This is what the simultaneity model asks us to accept. The main problem, above all other problems, with this is that it accedes objective structures no independent existence. They are collapsed into action, and hence action itself is seen as the immanent realization of objective structure. Giddens's work is full of formulations of this kind. For example, 'social systems only exist in so far as they are continually created and recreated in every encounter, as the active accomplishment of subjects'<sup>64</sup> whilst Bourdieu is constantly concerned with the 'actualization' and/or 'accomplishment' of structures in practice.<sup>65</sup> Both writers adopt this position via their rejection of Saussurian and Levi-Straussian structuralism because of its denigration of the subject, and action (reflexivity, practice) and its consequent treatment of structures in the reified mode as autonomous objects. Thus Giddens sees the primary task of a theory of action as 'reconciling the notion of structure with the necessary centrality of the active subject'<sup>66</sup> whilst Bourdieu similarly wants to reconcile in a dialectical fashion, objective structures and the practices within which those structures are actualized.

Giddens and Bourdieu do not reject phenomenology in toto, nor do they reject structuralism in toto. They really want to rid these schools of thought of certain excesses and sketch in a mediating alternative(s). For Bourdieu, this is 'habitus', for Giddens, the mediating principle goes under several different names: structuration, double hermeneutic duality of structure. It could be argued that Giddens's and Bourdieu's schemes amount to much the same thing, and in many respects this is true. However, it could also be argued that Bourdieu gives more credence to the idea of structure being a set of objective relations independent of subjects which act as a 'pre-given universe of objects'

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<sup>63</sup> Giddens, *New Rules* (London, 1976), p.127.

<sup>64</sup> Giddens, 'Functionalism' in *Social Research* 43:2 (1976), p.118.

<sup>65</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), pp.3, 23.

<sup>66</sup> Giddens, 'Functionalism' in *Social Research*, 43:2 (1976), p.117.

(Giddens's terms) which Giddens rejects. Also his idea that the 'conjuncture' represents the concrete as a particular 'state' of the structure in some respects has more in common with structuralist Marxist theories of actors as 'agents' or 'bearers' and thus subject to certain criticisms. None the less, in opposition to this, there is also a case to be made for the argument that Bourdieu shares with Giddens the idea that structures are in some sense the outcome or 'accomplishment' of the situated doings of actors, in which case structures could not be said to have an existence separate from the situations in which they were accomplished. Bourdieu is highly equivocal over this matter, and is so deliberately, to disguise the logical, theoretical and substantive contradiction of trying to make structure at one and the same time determinate, but not too determinate (that is, determinatively indeterminate), in order to account for novelty and creativity in action. On this interpretation, Bourdieu is very much in the same position as Giddens. They both attempt a middle-way synthesis between structure and action or the active subject in order to transcend the false dualism of an interactive versus structural determinism. However, such a dissolution of the distinction between structure and action merely emasculates the concept of structure by depriving it of autonomous properties or a pre-given facticity. The effect of such an absence is to drive the notion of structure back into the given, the concrete, 'the creation and recreation in every encounter'. Thus production and reproduction by active subjects are the constituting processes of structure. There cannot be one without the other, 'All reproduction is necessarily production'<sup>67</sup>, they cannot refer to separate processes or separate structures - and since the 'proper locus for the study of social reproduction is in the immediate process of the constituting of interaction - Giddens is on the same terrain as the ethnomethodologists and phenomenologists in that his analysis inevitably leads to a conception of social structure as nothing other than the ephemeral constructions and reality negotiations of situated actors.

A theory of action needs to differentiate between different kinds of 'structures' if the idea of the 'skilled accomplishments of actors' is to be reconciled with the idea of an objective and pre-given set of structural constraints. This necessarily involves a

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<sup>67</sup> Giddens, *New Rules* (London, 1976), p.102.

reworking of the ideas of production and reproduction as they are found in the writing of Giddens and Bourdieu.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to pull together threads and themes in contemporary sociology with reference to the problem of the 'links' between social action and social structure. The main problem with functionalism in this respect is not a lack of a psychological or behavioural dimension. Rather the failing of functionalism lays in its entrapment in an unconditional structural determinism; an epistemological posture generated by its commitment to an ontology of supra-individual systems. Objections to this theory of action have stemmed from the symbolic interactionists and the ethnomethodologists, who, in their turn, became entrapped in an interactive determinism, which left them unable to adequately account for structural constraints on action.

One of the main reactions to the functionalist hegemony in sociology, the emergence of a 'conflict theory' of society, was pre-occupied with the 'nature' of societies or social systems rather than with a theory of interaction as such. In this sense many of the limitations of functionalist analysis remained present in mainstream sociology, vis-a-vis accounting for interaction, and provided a backcloth against which Bourdieu and Giddens have argued against a mechanistic theory of action and a model of the actor, to use Garfinkel's phrase, as a 'cultural dope'. However neither of these authors successfully resolves many crucial issues in the debate since, in trying to reconcile the notion of the subject as an active producer of social structure, they have emasculated the concept of structure, and thus find themselves on the terrain of the interactionists and phenomenologists by denying the causal role of pre-given determinative constraints in the explanation of action. In fact, the concept of structure is objectively independent and determining. But this does not necessarily lead (as Giddens and Bourdieu think) to a mechanical theory of action. Although in the case of the Marxist-rationalists this latter has been a consequence of their adherence to such a view of structure.

## CONCLUSION

There are two theoretical pitfalls in seeking to understand historical agency, less obvious because they are made by opponents of structuralism. One is, quite simply, to sentimentalize human beings, to drown the fact of collective action in expressions of admiration for the actors' courage and endurance, treating any attempt to examine the objective conditions in which historical struggles unfold as almost obscene, the dissection of a living body. Edward Thompson has sometimes been guilty of such an attitude, less in his historical writings proper than in polemics such as *The Poverty of Theory*. The other mistaken stance represents in one respect the opposite extreme. The formal analyses of rational-choice theory decompose the structures of individual and collective action with painstaking care. They too, however, bracket the objective context of action, so that often the causes and course of social struggles become incomprehensible.

The argument of this thesis avoids these various traps. An adequate theory of agency must be a theory of the causal powers persons have. Intentional explanations of human action, invoking beliefs and desires as reasons for acting, are necessary because of the peculiar kind of living organisms human beings are—in particular, because of the especial capacities they possess for consciously reflecting on and altering not merely their actions, but also their thoughts. Action-explanations contain a hidden premiss referring to the agent's power to perform the action in question. In normal circumstances this premiss may be ignored, since the capacities assumed are those possessed by any healthy adult person, but this is by no means always the case when the explanation of social events is in question.

Structures play an ineliminable role in social theory because they determine an important subset of human powers. These are what I have called, following Erik Olin Wright, structural capacities, the powers an agent has in virtue of his or her position within the relations of production. Viewing structures from this perspective involves breaking with the idea of them as limits on individual or collective action, providing a framework within which human agency can then have free play. In so far as their position in structures delimits the possibilities open to agents, they are also presented

with the opportunity to pursue their goals in particular directions. Anthony Giddens among contemporary social theorists has most forcefully expressed this basic insight-structures enable as well as constrain. But he then undermines his argument by identifying structure with the resources available to agents. The effect is to keep structure within the framework of the utilitarian theory of action, for resources are, as Giddens puts it, the media of power, means used by agents to further their ends, not in any sense determinants of action. Resources of different kinds - material, culture, organizational - are, however, available to agents because of their position within production relations. It is as the determinant of the access people have to resources, and not as the resources themselves, that structure figures in social theory.

Historical materialism is itself a theory of structural capacities. Marx quite explicitly identifies the development of the productive forces in bourgeois society with 'the absolute working-out [humanity's] creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself.'<sup>1</sup> The productive forces are thus best understood as the productive powers of humanity, reflecting a particular, technically determined form of labour-process. But the relations of production also involve particular kinds of powers. This is clearest in G.A.Cohen's analysis of production relations as the powers agents have over labour-power and the means of production, but this is one version of a theme going back to Marx, according to which property-relations are to be understood as relations of effective control. Agent's structural capacities are thus determined by their relative access to productive resources, to labour-power and means of production.

This analysis of structures in terms of their role in determining agents' causal powers allows us to avoid the dead-end of structuralism in both its Althusserian and Parsonian forms. These theories seek to reconcile the fact of agency with the causal role of structures by treating persons as social constructs, their motivation and understanding formed through processes which lead them to internalize the prevailing ideology. Rational-choice theorists such as Jon Elster rightly wish to give proper scope to agents'

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<sup>1</sup> K.Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.488.

rationality. The concept of structural capacities allows us to do so without, as Elster does, reducing structures to the unintended consequences of individual action. It leaves open the question of how agents' thoughts have been formed: structures nevertheless figure ineliminably in the explanation of social events, since they help determine the powers that persons draw on when acting in the light of their beliefs and desires (however formed).

The present treatment of structure is consistent with a much stronger theory of agency than that to which rational-choice theorists subscribe. As chapter 3 should make clear, there is much to be said for the view of persons put forward by hermeneutically inclined philosophers such as Charles Taylor. Taylor argues that agents are capable of transcending the instrumental, means-end rationality ascribed to them by the utilitarian theory of action, and making 'strong evaluations' concerning the kinds of desires they ought to have, and the kind of persons they should be. This approach, however, seems to pull away from the focus on crisis, conflict, and struggle made by Marxism, towards a more consensual and evolutionary conception of society. This is so, I suggest, only so long as we ignore agents' structural capacities. These give them different interests, in as much as to realize their ends people must engage in particular kinds of collective action, reflecting their specific position in production relations and bringing them often into conflict with those in other positions. This argument by no means nullifies the considerations advanced by Taylor: strong evaluations and the commitments they entail are essential to explaining why agents engage in collective action when, in narrowly instrumental terms, it is irrational for them to do so. Taylor's broader conception of agency is indispensable if we are to understand why, despite the Prisoner's Dilemma and the free-rider problem, resistance, rebellion, and even revolution occur.

The existence of structural capacities is not equivalent to that of collectivities exercising them. The construction of collectivities, of groups of agents coordinating their actions in the light of a common identity which they believe themselves to share, formed the central theme of chapter 4. Only certain issues were pursued - the nature of the beliefs involved in social action (ideologies); the historical conditions in which two kinds of collectivity are formed (class and nation). There is, however, enormous scope for

empirical inquiry into the specific conditions favouring or impeding the formation of collectivities of one sort or another. If the arguments put forward in this thesis are correct, they may be of some help in formulating better questions for such investigations to seek to answer.

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