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Setting Up the Terrain: Classical Sociology and Culture

Introduction

Contemporary issues, debates and controversies in the sociology of culture would scarcely be understandable if one did not take account of the contributions of the sociologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of the themes that have been dealt with by later thinkers were first identified and pursued by the early sociological pioneers. In fact, much of the later writings in the sociology of culture have involved extensions, refinements, reworkings and rejections of the assumptions and ways of thinking first forged by the classical sociologists.

Writing in 1988, the American social theorist Jeffrey C. Alexander (1988: 1) stated that, at that point in time, there was ‘as yet, scarcely any cultural analysis’ in sociology. Such a statement barely describes the actual state of affairs. Even a passing glance at the works of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sociologists shows that they were almost all engaged in ways of understanding culture. An important part of early sociology is a series of reflections upon culture. From the very beginning, sociology was not just an investigation of *social life*, but of *cultural life* too.

Examining the ideas of classical sociology is therefore not just an exercise in archaeology. It is an absolutely necessary way of understanding how sociology operates today. In this chapter we will examine the different schools of thought in classical sociology, and look at two key issues that informed the classical sociologists’ efforts to understand cultural matters. The first issue is a theoretical one: what are ‘culture’ and ‘society’, and how do the two relate to each other?

The second issue is a more substantive one: in the classical sociologists' opinions, what was the nature of *modern* culture, and what were its strengths and weaknesses? Was the culture of modern society a 'healthy' one, or one that was corrupt and harmful for the well-being of modern social life? The various answers that the classical sociologists gave to these questions are at the root both of what they offered later sociologists, and of what they might bequeath to us today.

We begin this chapter by examining the crucial intellectual split that informs much of later sociology, namely the divide between Enlightenment and Romanticism. We will examine this division in terms of how it led both to very different conceptions of culture and to divergent kinds of sociologies. We then turn to the ideas of Karl Marx, and the legacy of Marxist understandings of culture. We continue by examining the contributions made to later German sociological studies of culture by, among others, Alfred Weber, Max Weber and Georg Simmel. We then consider the tradition set up by Emile Durkheim, a mode of understanding culture developed further by two of his twentieth-century inheritors, Karl Mannheim and Talcott Parsons. We conclude by considering the ways in which classical sociology continues to inform thinking about culture today.

Enlightenment and Romanticism

The term 'classical sociology' is a relatively recent invention. The sociologists of the nineteenth century and before, to whom the term refers, did not of course see their own endeavours in such a light, because 'classical' is a description that can only ever be used after the events it refers to have passed. The very word 'classical' suggests something out of a museum, rather than a living, breathing thing. But in their time, the people we now call 'classical sociologists' were engaged in some of the greatest intellectual controversies of their day. Generally, they felt that what they were doing was not just a dry academic exercise, but was of pressing importance not only for understanding the society in which they lived, but also in changing it for the better (or, at the very least, in complaining about how bad things were becoming). There were always, in one way or another, *political* motives behind the sometimes apparently 'neutral' views put forward by sociologists, a situation that continues today. These political dispositions were shaped in turn by the social backgrounds of the people involved in creating knowledge about society, a fact they were sometimes very aware of and sometimes not. The main point is that the

early sociologists studied culture in ways that were profoundly formed by *who they were* and *what they believed in*. So in order fully to understand what their various opinions were as to cultural matters, we have to grasp the social and intellectual contexts out of which they and their ideas arose.

The terrain that we now call ‘classical sociology’ is a very complex one, for it is made up of a whole series of ideas and positions that are in some ways often very different from each other, but in other ways also often bear striking resemblances. A good way of making sense of this complicated field is to divide it up into two major trends. This is inevitably a simplification of a convoluted situation, but it does help us see more clearly the issues we are dealing with. The two main tendencies we can identify are those of Enlightenment and Romanticism. Enlightenment thinking came to prominence, particularly in France, in the later eighteenth century. The themes pursued by Enlightenment thinkers, such as the philosophers Voltaire and Diderot, included an emphasis on scientific thinking as being superior to other types of thought, especially the more imaginative and poetic types (Frankel, 1969). The form of thought known as Romanticism arose in the early nineteenth century as a critical response to Enlightenment’s focus on, and celebration of, rational thought and the natural sciences. While Enlightenment thought glorified the scientist, Romantic ideas were primarily produced by, and eulogized, artists and poets. Such ideas were especially important in Germany and England. Romanticism defended against the scientific mentality of Enlightenment such values as individualism, poetic expression and artistic imagination (Berlin, 2000).

The divide between ‘scientific’ and ‘poetic’ thinking was therefore an expression of the social and political divisions between rationalist scientists on the one side, and anti-rationalist poets, literary figures and artists on the other. The cleavage between these two broad camps also expressed a national divide: between the French who tended to advocate an Enlightenment view of the virtues of natural science, and the Germans who were more inclined towards a defence of the benefits of a poetic, ‘spiritual’ and ‘imaginative’ approach to life. In Britain, Enlightenment and Romanticist thought took hold of different sections of the intellectual community, with Romanticist ideas being particularly important for the development of the specifically English approach to culture known as ‘culturalism’ (see chapter 4).

The division between Enlightenment and Romanticism wrought profound effects on the nature of the various different types of sociology that developed in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Dawe, 1970). This was true both in terms of the methods of

study that were developed, and in terms of the political views of the early sociologists. In terms of the methods by which sociology was to be carried out, Enlightenment thinking emphasized that sociology should be a project based on the model of the natural sciences. This meant, amongst other things, a search for the 'laws' of social life, a collection of empirical 'data', and attempts at working out rigorous ways of collecting that data. This style of sociology was particularly influential in France, with figures from Auguste Comte (1798–1857) through to Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) and beyond all stressing the virtues of 'positivist' science, which had the characteristics just described. This position argued for an approach to the study of society based on 'hard' scientific evidence.

While Enlightenment-influenced positivist sociologists looked to the natural sciences to provide a model for the newly emerging social sciences, those influenced by Romanticist ideas argued for a non-'scientific', more interpretative and imagination-driven approach, characteristic of humanities disciplines like literary criticism (Hawthorn, 1976). As was the case with Romanticist thinking more generally, this kind of approach within sociology specifically was most dominant in Germany. Particularly influential in this context were the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803; see Barnard, 1965). Herder argued that a particular 'culture' was comprised of the typical mental patterns, attitudes, emotions and ways of doing things characteristic of a certain group or nation. Each nation had a unique culture that could not be compared with any other nation's culture. The analyst should see a particular culture as an 'organic' whole, woven out of the various different elements that make up the life of a nation, such as religious beliefs, moral ideas and ways of speaking. It is important to note that, on this view, 'culture' is not just the 'high culture' of that society – the 'great' works of art, philosophy and so on – but *everything*, including the tiniest details of everyday life.

At a later date, but still in the same line of thinking, the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) formulated a distinction which subsequently came to be very influential in German sociology (Makkreel, 1975). He argued that the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the human (or 'cultural') sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) were wholly different, not just in terms of the objects they examined but also in terms of approaching and studying those objects. The natural sciences study natural objects, which are either inert (e.g. rock formations) or living but subhuman (plants and animals). But the objects of the human sciences are living, breathing human beings, invested with 'spirit' (*Geist*) and who are alive, creative and endowed with consciousness. In line with Herder, Dilthey

asserted that this 'spirit' does not derive from individuals but from socio-cultural groups (*Volk*), whose collective cultural life (*Kultur*) is thoroughly permeated with spiritual values that are unique to that group. Thus the human ('cultural') sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) are literally the study of the human 'spirit', this spirit taking on unique cultural forms at different times and in different places. Herder had already argued that each culture arises 'spontaneously' from the life of each nation. As a result, it is not susceptible to supposedly 'scientific' investigation, as positivist science alleged. Instead, the analyst must sympathetically imagine what it is like to be a member of that culture. He or she must seek to reconstruct by interpretation how the typical individual brought up in that culture thinks and feels. The study of 'culture' meant *interpretation* of the spiritual values and the forms of consciousness of a given group of people (Rickman, 1988). This idea of 'interpretative understanding' (*Verstehen*) came to be central not only in German sociology, but also in anthropology in various national contexts (Kuper, 1999).

As a result of these different dispositions in France and Germany, there grew up what were in some ways very different attitudes towards what sociology was supposed to be examining. In the French context, sociology was pre-eminently the study of *social* factors, those elements of human life involving the *structured patterns of interaction* between people. In Germany, however, sociology was generally regarded as an exercise in the study of *culture*, where the term was understood to refer to the aspects of human life involving ideas and spiritual values.

These two distinct sets of disposition towards what sociology should look like were also connected to divergent political views about what the *purpose* of sociology should be. Herder and other German thinkers influenced by Romanticism rejected the Enlightenment view that there was a hierarchy of cultures, with less sophisticated ones at the bottom and more complex ones at the top. For Herder, each culture is to be valorized for its own sake, and not subjected to false comparisons with other cultures that are designed to make it look 'inferior' to them. Sociology, which was in effect synonymous with the study of culture, sometimes came to figure in Germany as a celebration of particular cultures (especially ones that no longer existed) rather than as a critique of them.

The reason for this lay in the highly critical attitudes German Romanticism had towards present-day society. Modern society was regarded as being highly 'mechanical' and 'impersonal', in stark contrast to how the medieval past was imagined to be: a society which possessed a truly 'organic' culture, that had sprung from 'the people'

and so was utterly 'authentic', unlike the highly 'artificial' and 'inauthentic' culture of the present. This assessment of the relative merits of present and past cultures lay at the base of the ideas of the important early German sociologist Alfred Tönnies (1855–1936). Tönnies's (1955 [1877]) key analytic distinction was between the type of society characteristic of pre-modernity, including the medieval period (*Gemeinschaft*) and the type of society characteristic of modernity (*Gessellschaft*). The older type of society had been organic in the way it had functioned, and had bound individuals together into a community characterized by a common culture. By contrast, the new type of society was mechanical in its functioning, and the atomized individuals that lived within it had no sense of being bound to the people around them. In this line of thought, shared by Tönnies and many others influenced by Romantic ideas, 'culture' (*Kultur*) was understood as involving the superior, 'spiritual' qualities of traditional German ways of life. It was morally and aesthetically superior to 'civilization' (*Zivilisation*), the modern-day society characterized by material progress in the economy, the rise of scientific thought in the intellectual sphere, and an increasing level of triviality in thought and feeling (Elias, 1995 [1939]). In this German tradition, 'culture' was seen as something not only removed from and (partly or wholly) autonomous of the social, political and economic spheres, but also as something vastly superior to them.

For French Enlightenment thought, the exactly opposite opinion was the dominant one. Here, the idea of 'civilization' was generally regarded in a very positive light, for it suggested material and intellectual progress. Present-day society was felt to be more sophisticated than, and so superior to, the medieval past. This previous society was felt to be riven with superstition and brutality, elements that would or could be erased from human life now that history was moving in a direction of constant improvements in all spheres of life (Febvre, 1998). What was valorized in France (science, material progress) was denigrated in Germany, and what was celebrated in Germany (traditional ways of thinking and acting, the 'organic' culture of the past) was despised in France. This situation had profound effects on the nature of French social science. Enlightenment-derived sociology in France tended to see culture as mystificatory ways of thinking, propagated by particular powerful groups such as priests and aristocrats in order to muddle the thinking of other groups, and so keep themselves in a position of power. Culture on this view is like a fog that is draped over society at the instigation of the powerful. It hides from the view of the powerless what the society is really like. The purpose of sociology becomes to reveal to the powerless how the powerful

have duped them through the means of culture. While Romanticist thinking tends to see 'social' and 'cultural' factors as very closely related, if not actually completely synonymous, Enlightenment-inspired thought separates them, with culture being shown to be in the service of particular types of *social power*. This way of thinking was particularly powerful in the French context, where it was part of the sentiments associated with the French Revolution of 1789. But it is also from this form of Enlightenment thinking that Karl Marx, rebelling against the tendencies of his German upbringing, derived his claim that culture is *ideological*, the view that culture often has the social role of hiding sources of social power and aiding them to operate more effectively (Eagleton, 1991).

'Culture' and 'Nature'

Enlightenment-derived sociology, especially prominent in France, therefore was generally more crucially concerned with issues of social power than was German sociology (although, as we will see shortly, the German Max Weber put issues of power at the centre of his sociology). Sociology derived from Enlightenment principles also tended to give much more attention than did Romanticist thought to the relations between social and cultural factors on the one hand, and those of 'nature' on the other. The influential position of Dilthey, which drove a wedge between the social/cultural sciences and the natural sciences, meant that the former were regarded in the German situation as not being concerned with the roles that physical nature plays within the social or cultural realms.

But, arguably, this position closes down an important aspect of the study of culture: finding out how and why culture may be different from 'nature'. Regardless of how unsatisfactory their attempts might now look, Enlightenment-inspired sociologists in France and elsewhere at least tried to grapple with this problem. For example, the Englishman Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), a leading light in the study of social development as an *evolutionary* process, regarded *cultural* development as a result of *social* evolution, which was in its turn a result of transformations of the 'natural' factors of matter and energy. Spencer refers to the cultural realm as the 'super-organic environment'. By this he means that culture is something beyond nature, yet produced by it. In very primitive societies, he argues, humans are affected mostly only by the 'organic environment', that is, the natural world. But as human societies develop and become more complex, so too does the 'super-organic environment' of culture.

Spencer, in like fashion to other evolutionary scientists of the time, sees the development of culture in terms of an evolution from simplicity to complexity, such that

the once few and simple customs, becom[e] . . . more numerous, definite, and fixed . . . [a]nd then there slowly evolve also the products we call aesthetic . . . [f]rom necklaces of fishbones we advance to dresses elaborate, gorgeous, and infinitely varied; out of discordant war-chants come symphonies and operas . . . in place of caves with rude markings there arise at length galleries of paintings; and the recital of a chief's deeds with mimetic accompaniment gives origin to epics, dramas, lyrics, and the vast mass of poetry, fiction, biography, and history. (1961 [1897]: 1022–3)

There are two important things to notice here. First, Spencer's argument goes against German Romantic viewpoints in that *cultural* developments are not treated as resulting only for *cultural* reasons, but for *social* and *material* reasons too, the latter rooted in the development of human life on earth. However, Spencer does not just reduce cultural factors to these other elements. He argues that at the most evolved levels of human society, culture constitutes 'an immensely-voluminous, immensely-complicated, and immensely-powerful set of influences' on social life (ibid. 1023). Thus, while society initially creates culture, culture itself comes to have effects on society.

Second, Spencer sees increasing complexity as characteristic of social and cultural development, with modern Western society being the most complex of all. Society moves from being an entity made up of a few simple parts, to one made up of a multiplicity of distinct components. This is a process of *structural differentiation*, whereby over time new social spheres emerge that are separate from other spheres. This is a result of an increasing complexity in the *division of labour*. For example, where there initially was one sphere called 'religion' in a less complex society, in a more complex society, of which Western modernity is the most developed example, out of this sphere arises a series of separate realms. As law, morality, art and so on become distinct social institutions, they get decoupled from religion, the sphere that initially encompassed them all. As a result, the religious sphere itself shrinks to encompass only narrowly 'sacred' matters (e.g. beliefs in 'God'), and loses much of its previous social importance. As society becomes more differentiated into autonomous spheres, so too does culture, with separate spheres of culture – the art sphere, the legal sphere, the academic sphere – being characteristic of the complex society of modernity. At the level of the division of

labour – that is, at the level of different types of job – the religious sphere initially was operated by people called priests, who also had legal, moral, intellectual and artistic functions. But as these areas become separate spheres in their own right, priests are replaced by specialists who operate each field – professionals such as lawyers, moralists, academics and artists.

Spencer's views on the nature of social evolution are today generally regarded as being far too Eurocentric, as they over-privilege Western modernity by claiming it to be the most 'developed' form of society (Sztompka, 1993). Nonetheless, Spencer's views remain useful for two reasons. First, he attempts to face an issue his German counterparts generally ducked out of: relating society and culture to 'nature'. Second, his theme of structural differentiation and his focus on the emergence in the modern West of separate spheres of culture have both remained important in later sociological studies of culture.

Karl Marx: culture as ideology

Karl Marx (1818–83) stands as one of the most important of the early sociologists, although he did not describe himself as a 'sociologist'. Marx's ideas have been hugely influential upon later sociological studies of culture. Thus it is necessary to understand the full importance of what he was attempting to do. Most of those we now term the 'classical sociologists' examined the nature of modern society in light of the increasing complexity of the division of labour and processes of structural differentiation, and Marx was no exception. As a communist revolutionary whose political aim was the overthrow of capitalist society, he had a particular perspective on these issues. He developed an approach that was highly critical of such developments, in contrast to what he saw as the blandly optimistic views held by people such as Spencer. In this regard, Marx was like many other Germans who held Romanticist ideas about the less than ideal nature of modern society. For Marx, as for the German Romantics, modern society was a cold and mechanical, if not in fact a wholly brutal, form of society, that isolated individuals from each other and exhibited vast amounts of socially induced misery. The cultural state of this society was such that, in Marx's view, far from being welcome, it was one that people should actively strive to abolish, by helping to foment working-class revolution. The theme of human emancipation was crucial for both Romantic and Enlightenment ways of thinking, but the latter located human freedom in the further pursuit of scientific knowledge, whereas the former often emphasized

individual rebellions against the ordered, bureaucratic nature of modern life. Marx retained this Romantic strain in his thinking, but shifted the focus to *collective* revolutionary activity by the working class against their capitalist masters.

Conversely, Marx's actual method of social and cultural analysis owed less to any German ideas about 'cultural science', and more to Enlightenment ideals of natural science methodology, orientations particularly strong in France and Britain. In fact, much of Marx's intellectual attention was given over to rebelling against the highly 'spiritual' tendencies dominant in German thought, and to providing an alternative way of understanding human life that took account of 'material' factors too. These latter included relations of social power, the theme of Enlightenment social science, and the connections between society, culture and nature – the focus of evolutionary thinkers contemporary with Marx such as Spencer. Marx's (1991 [1845–6]) particular target was the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), whose highly spiritualistic philosophy was at that time a dominant force in German thought.

Hegel was part of the *idealist* movement in German philosophy, which argued that human life was best understood as involving ideas and mental representations (1975; see also Taylor, 1975). The world that humans confront is not to be understood as a material world that imposes itself on how human subjects view it. Instead, the world is a product of how it is viewed by those subjects. Thus the social world itself is composed of ideas. In more modern terms, we can say Hegel, rather like Herder, sees a particular society as the product of its characteristic and unique 'culture'. Culture (like ideas) is the primary factor in the life of a society, political and economic factors being downplayed in Hegel's account, if actually mentioned at all. Marx did find some of Hegel's thought useful, especially on how society and culture change by means of conflicts between antagonistic forces. Nonetheless, Marx insisted that the direction of Hegel's thinking would have to be reversed, and that the point was to 'turn Hegel on his head'. The resultant approach was called *historical materialism*, the fundamental focus of which is 'real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity' (Marx, 1991 [1845–6]: 42). Whereas Hegel, and idealist philosophy generally, claimed that it was ideas that produced the social world, Marx turned this proposition upside down, and argued that it was in fact the case that it was the social world that created ideas. *Instead of culture creating society, society is seen to create culture.* Marx expresses the position in the following way: 'It is not the consciousness

of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' (1977 [1859]: 21).

Thus Marx insists on an approach that sees not how 'culture' and other 'ideal' factors create social factors, but one that shows how social factors generate cultural phenomena. Actually, 'social' factors is rather a misnomer, for Marx actually refers to 'socio-economic' factors as being at the root of everything else, culture included. How the economic realm is socially organized in a particular society shapes very fundamentally the nature of that society's culture. He developed this position in some of his earlier writings, ideas that were further expanded in his more mature phase. In the later writings, the image that he utilized to describe the relationship between socio-economic and cultural factors has perhaps been the most controversial element of his sociological study of culture. This is the famous idea of 'base' and 'superstructure':

In the social relations of their existence, men [*sic*] inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of the material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. (1977 [1859]: 21)

This passage illustrates the notion of 'mode of production', which is central to the work of the mature Marx. Two related aspects of human production of material objects are being described. The first is how economic production is socially organized. The term used to identify such organization is *relations of production*. These relations involve how the work process is organized in terms of who controls it. The division of labour is based upon the division of people into property-owning and propertyless classes. The class that controls production is the ruling class. Their control is dependent upon the ownership of the tools and raw materials involved in the production of goods. These latter factors constitute the *forces of production*, and comprise the second aspect of human production of objects identified by Marx. The relations of production are the mechanisms whereby the forces of production are organized and controlled. Taken together, the forces and relations of production constitute the *material* (or 'socio-economic') *base* of a particular mode of production.

Marx's analysis of culture is dependent upon his claim that a mode of production consists of a *material base* and a *cultural superstructure*.

He phrased this point in terminology that derives from architecture. The base or foundation of the overall edifice (the overall mode of production) is made up of economic production, both its forces and relations. The *superstructure* of the edifice comprises 'forms of social consciousness', such as ideas, values and beliefs: that is to say, the stuff of culture. Moreover, legal and governmental apparatuses are also part of the superstructure. The superstructure *arises* on the basis of the material foundation. In other words, the base comes first, and the superstructure follows. Material factors are primary; cultural factors secondary. The essential thrust of Marx's argument is that if we want to understand a society, we should examine the nature of its material base. The base expresses itself in the nature of the superstructure. Thus a particular type of base will produce a particular form of cultural superstructure.

For example, the base of the modern capitalist economy generates a superstructure which is made up of a series of institutions and cultural forms that are characteristic of capitalist society. Marx tends towards a form of functionalist argument in outlining the roles of these institutions and cultural forms. The state is regarded as having the role of securing the interests of the ruling, capitalist class. The legal system is a mechanism which enforces the rights of the capitalist class to control production. Ways of thinking ('forms of consciousness') are ideologies, which operate in the service of masking the true, class-based and exploitative nature of the society. The general sense of Marx's argument is that the capitalist economic base both produces these things and relies for its continuance over time on their effective operation.

In a class-based society such as that of modern capitalism, part of the cultural superstructure is comprised of *dominant ideologies* which disguise the nature of the power held by dominant, elite groups by representing the social order as operating in the interests of all, not just elites. As Marx famously expressed this point:

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 ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas. (In McLellan, 1984: 184)

Marx's claims about the nature of this dominant ideology involve the conditions of both its *production* and its *consumption*. As concerns the latter, the classes lacking in power *materially* will also lack power *culturally*. As a result, they will generally not be in a position to

ascertain that the dominant ideology is a *misrepresentation* of the actual social situation, operating in the interests of the dominant class. Furthermore, they will generally be accepting of the status quo. In this model, *culture* is understood as being *ideological*, where the latter term means a misrepresentation of social (and economic and political) reality in the service of the powerful. Thus, culture helps to reproduce society by means of cloaking the true nature of that society in the eyes of those who live within it. In terms of the *production* of ideologies, these are created and disseminated by particular groups within the dominant class of a society, such as intellectuals, artists, philosophers and priests. It is their role to produce and spread the ideological ways of thinking taken on and accepted in other sectors of the society. It is important to note that Marx is not here subscribing to a conspiratorial kind of argument. These ideological producers are not setting out deliberately to mislead or distort. Generally, they believe what they are saying and writing. The production of a dominant ideology is the result of generally unintentional activities on their part.

The *unintended consequences* of particular actions was a key theme that Marx took from Hegel. Hegel had identified a condition of *alienation*, whereby a human subject creates an object which then seems to take on a life of its own and as a result takes control over the subject that created it. This is rather like the story of Frankenstein's monster, written about the same time as Hegel penned his philosophy. A human subject (Baron Frankenstein) creates an object (the Monster), which takes on a life of its own, and runs amok, causing great misery to its creator. For Marx and for other thinkers influenced by German Romantic ideas, this was exactly the condition of modern culture. People created ideas – cultural forms – that then came to enslave them, because the original creators could not recognize that they had themselves created such things initially – a situation of utter alienation (Marx, 1981 [1844]: 63).

In his later work, Marx (1988 [1867]: 163–77) emphasized the ways in which the capitalist economy – the socio-economic base of capitalist society – created a cultural superstructure that was alienated from, and out of the control of, the people who operated within it. He described this situation as the *fetishism of commodities*. Under a capitalist economy, the products – commodities – made by workers seem to have a life all of their own. This life is called 'market forces', whereupon the 'economy' appears to be an independent entity, rather than what it actually is: the result of human productive activity. The people who have made the commodities come to believe that the commodities have ultimate power over them, and come to accept this

alienated situation as inevitable and unavoidable. A later Marxist, Georg Lukács (1971 [1923]), termed this predicament *reification*, a process whereby, in a class-based society such as capitalism, humans come to perceive the reality around them through a distorted cultural lens, such that the true nature of the society remains systematically hidden from view. For Marx and for other German thinkers influenced by Romantic ideas, modern society seemed to be like an out-of-control juggernaut which no one could take charge of. But unlike these others, who often blamed the debased nature of modern culture for this calamity, Marx and the Marxist tradition laid the blame squarely at the door of the capitalist economy, which is seen to disempower the people who actually make things – the working class – and to ensure continued power of the dominant elite – the class of capitalist owners. Cultural malaise is seen to be the result of imbalances in power in the socio-economic realm.

The passage cited above that outlines Marx's 'base' and 'superstructure' model has been the subject of more controversy and dispute than perhaps any other part of Marx's writing. This has been in large part due to its apparent downgrading of culture as a mere 'superstructural' offshoot of the socio-economic base. On this model, culture becomes a mere appendage or afterthought to an allegedly more fundamental set of material, socio-economic factors. What critics from both inside and outside Marxism have claimed is that this model simply does not grasp the true nature of culture. Different critics have different opinions on this matter, but their objections to the base and superstructure paradigm boil down to this series of possible objections:

- 1 Culture is not actually derivative or secondary to 'material factors'. It is either as important as or more important than material factors in the operation of actual human societies.
- 2 Not all societies exhibit such a preponderance of 'economics' over 'culture' as does modern Western capitalism. Marx's model might hold for that society, but it does not apply universally. Other societies are much more based around cultural matters than modern capitalism is.
- 3 There is never a complete or absolute division between 'material' and 'cultural' factors. They are always mixed up together in concrete instances. Culture has 'material' aspects, and 'material factors' possess cultural elements.
- 4 It is false to say that material (socio-economic) factors are 'real' and cultural factors merely 'ideal'. The latter are just as 'real' as the former.

- 5 Strangely enough, Marx's hostility to idealist views leads to a situation where he understands 'culture' as being somehow 'above' society, in the 'superstructure'. This unintentionally recreates one of the problems that Marx identified in idealism: that it cannot understand how 'society' and 'culture' are related to each other. The critic of idealism has fallen into the same trap into which he himself alleged the idealists fell.
- 6 Culture cannot be reduced just to 'ideology' and the interests of a ruling class. There is more to culture than Marx admits.
- 7 Culture should not be seen as being wholly tied to the material base. It should be seen either as autonomous – independent of material factors – or at least as semi-autonomous.

This last criticism, that culture is more autonomous than Marx allows, was actually an issue that Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels [1820–95] wrestled with between themselves. In a letter written towards the end of his life, Engels responded to what he saw as misinterpretations of Marx's position, which claimed that it was a form of *economic determinism*, a method of analysis which ruthlessly reduced everything else, especially cultural factors, to the primacy of the economic base. Engels characterized what he saw as Marx's actual position in this way:

the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure . . . also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. There is an interaction of all these elements in which . . . the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. (1968 [1890]: 692)

Here Engels formulated what has subsequently become known as the thesis of 'determination in the last instance'. This is the notion that cultural factors *can* play a significant role in social life. In particular, they can shape the forms that struggles between the classes take, with class being viewed by Marx and Engels as the central aspect of human life up until the present day. For example, classes may come into conflict over the details of a cultural phenomenon such as a religious doctrine. But this class conflict, which in this case takes on religious *form*, is *ultimately* traceable to the antagonism between classes at the

material, socio-economic level. Thus cultural factors are important, but *ultimately not as important* as material factors. Thus Engels is arguing that Marx's schema gives a certain degree of autonomy to cultural factors. But in the last instance, the 'real' (rather than 'ideal') socio-economic factors in a situation determine its fundamental character. Economic factors are, says Engels, 'ultimately decisive'.

German sociology's responses to Marx

Although it was intended as a final statement on these matters, Engels' position here has created almost as much controversy as have the base/superstructure statements of Marx himself. It has often been alleged that what Engels (and Marx) give with one hand – an admittance of the importance of cultural factors in social life – they take away with the other, through the assertion that despite the importance of cultural phenomena, they are ultimately both products of, and also therefore less 'decisive' than, the material factors in the economic base. The degree to which cultural factors are regarded as having an autonomous role in social life beyond the constraints of the economic base has become one of the foci of conflicts within later Marxism. The question later Marxists have struggled with is this: if cultural factors are *partly independent* of the material base, to what extent are they actually autonomous? A great deal or just a little? And the apparent *economic reductionism* of Marx and Engels has been the main charge that critics outside Marxism have brought to bear on the historical materialist approach to the study of culture and society.

German sociologists in the period after Marx's death debated long and hard about these issues. The debate was set up in terms of whether 'material' (socio-economic and 'natural') factors were more important in human life than 'ideal' (cultural) factors, such as ideas and values. Marx's critics accused him of having gone too far in the 'materialist' direction when he rejected the 'idealist' ideas of Hegel. These critics asserted that cultural factors are not just simply the products of social and economic factors. What Marx's materialist position missed was that cultural processes and artefacts are *meaningful* and therefore need to be *interpreted*. This echoed the ideas of Herder from the beginning of the nineteenth century. But by the end of that century and on into the early twentieth century, German sociologists generally concurred that a completely idealist position was as unsatisfactory as a wholly materialist one. Therefore the problem became one of finding a way of taking account of both materialist

and idealist forms of analysis, and thus of seeking some way of dealing with both 'society' and 'economy' on the one side, and 'culture' on the other.

Max Scheler (1874–1928), for example, argued that the task of sociology was to examine a particular concrete situation and to *measure* how influential both 'material' and 'ideal' factors were within it (1980 [1924]). The benefit of this position was that it forced sociologists to carefully consider the *empirical evidence* pertaining to a particular situation. The drawback is that it assumes that the evidence will somehow speak for itself, and let the analyst know whether material or ideal factors were more important within the situation. This does not take account of the possibility that such decisions are made not just on the basis of evidence, but also rely upon the previously existing commitments by the analyst to a more materialist or more idealist way of analysing issues. The raw data do not contain any answers in themselves, because they have to be interpreted in light of a particular type of analysis.

Another attempt to strike some kind of balance between 'idealism' and 'materialism' was put forward by Alfred Weber (1868–1958). He rejected the division of 'material' and 'ideal' factors, arguing there were actually three elements involved in human life rather than just two. Weber (1998 [1920–1]) identified the first element as the *social process*. This was comprised of the 'material' aspects of social organization: the division of labour, economic activities, forms of political power, kinship organization and so on. The second element was the *civilizational process*, which involved the development of rational knowledge, scientific thought and, on these bases, the development of technology. The third element was the *cultural process*, which referred to the idea of Herder that each particular nation's 'culture' is unique and unlike any other. Each 'culture' is the embodiment of the 'soul' of a given set of people, their innermost strivings to represent to themselves the nature of the universe. What Weber was trying to do was twofold. First, he wanted to show that other thinkers had mixed up these three elements, or had downplayed one at the expense of the others. Thus Marx had overemphasized the social and civilizational processes at the expense of the cultural process, whereas Herder and the German Romantics had overemphasized the latter at the expense of the other two. Second, Weber argued that while the social process involved material factors, and the cultural process ideal factors, the civilizational process actually was made up of *both* material and ideal features. This was because it comprised both rational thought (ideas) and technological advances (material factors such as machines). It remains unclear in Weber's analysis precisely how the three processes

relate to each other. Nonetheless his is a sophisticated attempt to think of a way out of the simple divide between ‘materialism’ and ‘idealism’, and to take sociology in a less dogmatically materialist or idealistic direction.

The same may be said of Alfred Weber’s brother, Max (1864–1920). On the face of it, Max Weber seems to belong more in the ‘idealist’ than the ‘materialist’ camp. His definition of culture as ‘a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance’ (cited in Turner, 1996: 5) follows the typically German Romantic and idealist tradition of stressing the *meaningfulness* of culture. Likewise, his definition of sociology as ‘the interpretive understanding of social action’ (cited in Alexander, 1983: 30) is close to the view of Dilthey and others that sociology should not be like a natural science, but should involve an interpretative approach to the study of how cultural meanings motivate social actors to act in particular ways. The understanding of social action involves the reconstruction of the meaning-laden cultural contexts in which the actions in question take place.

Some later commentators have seen Weber’s sociology as being in deliberate opposition to Marx’s approach (Parsons, 1937). Many of Marx’s earlier works were unavailable to Weber because they were as yet unpublished, and thus Marx’s work probably did seem to him rather crudely materialist in parts. Even so, Weber’s approach to sociology can also be seen as an attempt to *refine* the ideas of Marx, especially those involving culture, rather than as a rejection of them. As Weber said at the end of his most famous work – his study of the ‘Protestant ethic’ (often taken as his most ‘idealist’ contribution to sociology):

it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and of history. Each is equally possible, but each, if it does not serve as the preparation, but as the conclusion of an investigation, accomplishes equally little in the interest of historical truth. (1930 [1905–6]: 183)

Like Scheler, then, Weber is a *sociological agnostic*, for he wishes to claim that one cannot assume that either ‘cultural’ or ‘ideal’ factors on the one side, and ‘material’ or ‘economic’ factors on the other, *must* be the most important in explaining any given situation. Instead, one must look carefully at the empirical data, and then make a decision as to what side of the coin one will emphasize. The main difference between Marx and Weber in this regard is that Marx *always*

assumes the priority of 'material' and 'economic' factors, whereas Weber will admit this is sometimes a useful assumption, but that it can also sometimes be misleading. For Weber, the reality of any situation is complex and messy, and all the sociologist can do is to build models to make some sense out of the chaos. But these models must be sensitive to the situation under study, so forcing a 'materialist' or 'idealist' model onto a situation where it is not warranted must be avoided. Weber is not interested in *mono-causal* explanations, but *poly-causal* ones, which attempt to model the complexities of the actual situation under study, as far as empirical evidence will allow (Bendix, 1966; Roth, 1979).

This much was hinted at by Scheler, but arguably Max Weber went further in fleshing these ideas out. He did this in a variety of ways. First, Weber (1982) denied what he took to be Marx's contention that membership of a class is the primary way an individual in a class-based society will think about themselves. There are other culturally mediated identities people may have, such as the pride in being a member of a particular group such as a sports club. Sports club membership and the feelings it provokes will be related to class issues (e.g. most of the members may be middle class), but this is an *indirect* relationship, and it is this possibility of other identities being more crucial than class membership that Marx does not allow for.

Second, Weber rejects what he thinks is Marx's position that socio-economic factors are always primary, while cultural factors are secondary. This makes too wide a division between cultural factors such as religion and what happens in the socio-economic realm. Weber's (e.g. 1966) studies of the main world religions attempted to show that economic actions were in fact motivated, at least initially, by religious beliefs. For example, he argued that the 'mindset' associated with Chinese Confucianism encouraged forms of social action oriented towards traditionalism and a desire to preserve the status quo. Christianity, by contrast, has inherently within it a 'world-transformative' capacity, which is oriented towards changing social conditions. Thus one of the reasons why modern capitalism developed in the West and nowhere else was *partly* because of the inherently dynamic nature of the religious-cultural factors associated with Christianity (Schroeder, 1992). In the same vein, Weber's study of the 'Protestant ethic' (1930 [1905–6]) was an attempt to show how Protestantism's religion of self-denial and hard work helped to shape the cultural context of early capitalist entrepreneurs, who in like fashion denied themselves pleasure and reinvested the profits they made in order to make even more profits. Protestant culture was, argued Weber, a significant – but not the only – feature of the development

of capitalism, a fact that Marx's obsession with material factors had made him blind to. Against Marx, Weber argued that a cultural phenomenon like a religious doctrine could be an important factor in its own right in stimulating 'material', economic developments.

Third, Weber not only argued that a cultural factor such as religion could be important in shaping the 'material' socio-economic realm; he also contended that, vice versa, material factors could influence the nature of religion too. He put forward the idea of 'elective affinity' (*Wahlverwandtschaft*), which points to situations where certain 'material' and 'ideal' factors can have a special relationship with one another, each exerting influence on the other. For example, certain religious ethics (ideal factors) tended to be adopted by particular social groups because of the material interests of those groups in maintaining or improving their power and wealth. Aristocratic groups maintain their power in part by adopting elaborate rituals as ways of excluding lower prestige groups. As a result, aristocracies tend to be attracted to and adopt types of religion that are very formal and have highly elaborate rituals, leaving more 'enthusiastic' and emotional forms of worship to groups lower in the social hierarchy (Collins, 1986: 136). (The notion of a particular group being oriented to specific types of cultural products is a key idea in later sociological studies of cultural consumption – see chapter 7.) Overall, then, Weber attempted to show that material and ideal factors are constantly affecting each other, and that a balance must be struck between the more materialist position of Marx and the more idealist positions prevalent amongst German thinkers.

This sophisticated position informs Weber's diagnosis of the social and cultural ills of modernity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, an air of pessimism was dominant amongst German intellectuals about contemporary cultural conditions. Standards in cultural life, and therefore in the quality of life per se, were felt to be rapidly in decline, due to the rise of a mass culture characterized by a lack of subtlety and feeling (Liebersohn, 1988). Weber's contemporary, Georg Simmel (1858–1918), referred to this situation as the 'tragedy of culture' (Frisby and Featherstone, 1997). Like Marx, Simmel drew on Hegel's idea of alienation to depict a scenario whereby the products made by a certain group of people came to take on a life of their own and dominate the original creators. In this case, Simmel saw the mass culture then arising – which involved newspapers, magazines and popular novels – as an increasingly powerful force in life, over which individuals had less and less control. Partly, these ideas were stimulated by the fear of German intellectuals like Simmel, and of the German educated middle classes (*Bildungsbürgertum*) more generally,

that these new cultural forms threatened their own hold on cultural power, and their ability to adjudicate for the wider public as to what was 'good' and 'bad' culture.

Max Weber too was one of those intellectuals who distrusted and disliked the new mass culture that was beginning to transform Western societies. But he did not, like Simmel, see these issues as purely the result of modern culture itself, nor did he, like Marx, locate the source of the problems of the modern world solely in the economic base of the capitalist economy. Instead, his famous diagnosis of modernity as an 'iron cage' of bureaucratic control stresses that this problem has both 'material' and 'ideal' aspects. The former are to be located in the material organization of modern society through the means of bureaucracies, both in the economic sphere of capitalist big business, and in the political sphere of state administration. At the more 'ideal' level, there is a mentality centred on a calculating form of rationality, oriented towards regulating and controlling ever more areas of life, and eliminating older religious and spiritual values in favour of what he and other German thinkers saw as a sterile scientific mindset. The people who live within such a cultural context are, in the words of the poet Goethe, 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart' (Weber, 1930 [1905–6]: 182). Weber is not claiming that this problem is only 'cultural' in aspect, as it is as much to do with the material organization of society through bureaucratic means as it is a result of a change in mentalities in the cultural sphere. Once again, Weber refused to submit to what he saw as the oversimplified explanations, either 'materialist' or 'idealist', that had plagued sociology up until then.

Durkheimian studies of culture

The tension between materialist and idealist approaches to the study of culture and society informs the work of another foundational figure of sociology, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). While his earlier work was more 'materialist' in orientation, his later ideas were much more 'idealist' in nature. In one sense, Durkheim's (1982 [1895]) ideas about how sociology should operate are very much part of the French Enlightenment tradition that argued that sociology should be based on the methods of the natural sciences. Nonetheless, throughout his career he gave serious attention to cultural phenomena, and in his later writings he switched the typical Enlightenment emphasis on how *society* produces and shapes *culture*, to how the latter shapes the operation of the former.

The continuity between Durkheim's early (e.g. 1984 [1893]) and late (2001 [1912]) works is the functionalist assumptions with which he always worked, cultural phenomena being seen to contribute to the generally harmonious functioning of the 'whole' society. This emphasis derived from Durkheim's desire to utilize sociology as a way of identifying and solving social problems, with a functionalist model of society and culture being used to highlight how particular factors could be engineered to be useful for the smooth operation of a society as a whole. In particular, Durkheim diagnosed as a central problem of modernity a condition of alienation he refers to as 'anomie' – 'norm-lessness'. Without strongly held beliefs, reinforced by cultural norms, modern individuals would feel dislocated from the society of which they were part. Durkheim stresses the part that culture has to play in reducing anomie and in maintaining social order. Culture's 'role' is to ensure that social patterns are maintained. Marx had argued much the same thing, but Durkheim's 'culture' is more beneficent than Marx's ideology, because 'culture' operates in the service of maintaining the *whole society*, whereas Marx saw ideology as upholding the interests of an elite.

In his early work, *The Division of Labour in Society* (1984 [1893]), Durkheim holds the view that it is *social structural* factors that shape the forms that *cultural* factors take. More specifically, it is the form taken by the *division of labour* that dictates the nature of that society's corresponding culture. In *Suicide* (1952 [1897]), Durkheim argued:

Given a people, consisting of a certain number of individuals arranged in a certain way, there results a determinate set of collective ideas and practices . . . [.] [A]ccording to whether the parts composing it are more or less numerous and structured in this or that way, the nature of collective life necessarily varies and, in consequence, so do its ways of thinking and acting. (Cited in Lukes, 1973: 231)

In other words, the *shape* of a particular society (its particular form of division of labour) determines the nature of the corresponding culture. For Durkheim and his collaborator Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), a society's culture is made up of a set of *collective representations* (1969 [1903]). These are the ways in which reality is made sense of collectively by the members of a society. The sense they have of their world derives from the ways in which their minds have been culturally shaped in the socialization process that begins at birth and which makes each person truly a 'member' of a certain society. Collective representations (or 'classifications') are the socially created lenses through which people make sense of reality and the world

around them, the frameworks through which they think and the bases on which they act. Culture, in the form of collective representations, transforms the world as perceived by the human senses into a realm mediated by and centred on symbols. In this way, the phenomena of 'nature' are transformed into objects of 'culture' (Lukes, 1973: 424). Humans have no direct access to 'reality'; instead, their reality is socially shaped by culture, which consists of the symbolism deployed in the collective representations. Culture on this view is a means of *processing* natural phenomena, giving them sense and meaning for human beings. Culture is a way of *dealing with* nature, bringing it into the grasp of the human mind.

All the collective representations of a given society taken together constitute that society's *cosmology* – its overall worldview. The assumption made by Durkheim and Mauss here is that the various elements of that cosmology are congruent and fit together. They do not contradict or clash with each other, but in sum create a seamless whole, the organizing principle of all thought and action within that society. The moulding of the mind by cultural forms in turn depends on the 'shape' of the society itself, because a particular type of society produces a corresponding set of *collective representations*. For example, the sense a given society has of time, and how it classifies time into a calendar with important events marked on it, is a product of the rhythms of collective life, such as when harvests occur. The collective representation (cultural understanding) of time is therefore a product of patterns of social organization. On this view, social patterns are expressed in cultural patterns, and the latter are generated by the former. This is an idea somewhat similar to Marx's base and superstructure model. Durkheim's particular version of this way of thinking argues that a simple division of labour produces a simple form of culture, made up of the religious beliefs of that society. A complex division of labour, by contrast, produces a complex culture, made up of a series of partly or fully autonomous spheres. For example, it is only when a certain level of social structural complexity has been reached that there can exist within culture a separate realm of 'art' that is not religious in aspect. This is because it is only when there is a sufficiently complex division of labour, which allows a group of secular artists to exist who are not directly connected to religious institutions, that secular art, rather than artworks used for religious purposes, can be created. This is Durkheim's take on the idea of the *structural differentiation* of society and culture which we remarked upon in relation to Spencer.

The idea that *society* produces *culture* is central to Durkheim's earlier works. But from the beginning he also argued that 'one would

form an entirely false idea of economic development if one neglected the moral causes which play a part in it' (1972: 92). In other words, rather like Max Weber, Durkheim refused to separate cultural factors like morality and religious beliefs from more 'material', socio-economic factors like the division of labour. In his later work, he moved towards a viewpoint that has some affinities with the German Romantic outlook, namely that culture constitutes society rather than the other way around.

In making this argument, Durkheim turned to 'primitive' societies with a low level of division of labour, in particular focusing on the religious-cultural aspects of Australian aboriginal societies. From analysis of such a 'simple' type of society, the most general and basic aspects of *all* societies could be deduced. Durkheim's central claim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (2001 [1912]) is that the main 'building blocks' of all societies are religious ideas, morals and values. It is these that are the crucial elements of any social order, not 'material' factors like the division of labour. The implications of this position are threefold. First, all cultures, regardless of the complexity of the society, have the same social function as religion: they bind people together through the sharing of common norms and values. Second, cultures, like religion, divide the world into two realms, that of the 'sacred' and that of the 'profane'. By identifying things that are morally 'bad', culture identifies what things are morally good and so can illustrate to members of the society the key values they must not only accept but also cherish. Third, such attachments to the wider society are periodically reinforced via the means of rituals. Rituals create a sense of common bonds between the members of a society, and render afresh their commitments to the society's central cultural values. In these various ways, norms and beliefs are instilled into the consciousness of individuals, compelling them to act in socially desirable fashions. This holds for modern societies as for any others. Grand ritualistic celebrations, such as the inauguration of a president, are ritualistic reinforcements of key values (e.g. the 'sanctity' of democracy). In this way, citizens' faith in those norms is reconfirmed, and the patterns of the society are maintained (Alexander, 1988).

After Durkheim: into the twentieth century

We have seen that Durkheim's earlier writings were more 'materialist' in character, whereas the later work was somewhat more 'idealist'. These alternatives were each taken up by later sociologists inspired by Durkheim. The more 'materialist' strain was developed by Karl

Mannheim (1887–1947), who was influenced not just by Durkheim but also by Marx. Mannheim is generally regarded as one of the main twentieth-century founders of the ‘sociology of knowledge’. This project is defined by Mannheim as ‘a theory of the social . . . determination of actual thinking’ (1985 [1936]: 267). Mannheim sought to relate certain *styles of thought* to the shape of the social conditions that produced them. He (*ibid.* 4) argues that if a group of people is to realize its aims, it has to struggle with its environment, both the natural environment of physical nature and the social environment that comprises other groups of people. The particular way in which those struggles occur determines the ways in which the group conceives the world around it, the ‘worldview’ (*Weltanschauung*) characteristic of that group. It is therefore collective activity, oriented towards the survival of the group, which produces the particular worldview which characterizes the group’s culture. In other words, the way a group or society *acts* is the basis and generator of how it *thinks*. Mannheim’s particular innovation is to apply Durkheim’s views on the social generation of culture away from the level of a whole society, to the study of particular groups *within* a society. Mannheim generally agrees with Marx that such groups are classes. Thus the social conditions of each class are regarded as producing the particular worldview of that class. Each class in a society, therefore, ‘sees’ the world somewhat differently from the others. The implication of this view is that each class in a society has its ‘own’ culture – that is, its own distinctive set of tastes and preferences, its own particular types of beliefs and values, and its own specific ways of understanding the world.

An important ramification for later sociology follows from this. Mannheim (1956: 184) argues that in societies where ‘the political and social order basically rests upon the distinction between “higher” and “lower” human types, an analogous distinction is also made between “higher” and “lower” objects of knowledge or aesthetic enjoyment’. In other words, where there is a class division between rulers and ruled, culture will be divided upon those lines. There will be a culture of the ruling classes that is defined as ‘high’, and a culture of the lower class(es) that will be defined as ‘low’. There is nothing intrinsically superior about the products of the ‘high’ culture. They are only regarded as ‘high’ because the ruling class has defined them that way. There is also nothing intrinsically inferior about the cultural objects used or enjoyed by the lower classes. Their inferiority is only a result of them having been defined as inferior by the ruling class. Such ideas as to the *relativity of cultural value* will be central in later sociologies of culture, as we will see.

The more 'idealist' strain of the sociology of culture coming out of Durkheim is that associated with the work of Talcott Parsons. In his book *The Social System* (1951) and elsewhere, Parsons argues that sociology should focus on the relations between the *social system*, the *cultural system* and the *personality system*. In particular, the sociological study of culture is defined as 'the analysis of the interdependence and interpenetration of social and cultural systems' (1961: 991). In other words, sociology looks at the relationships between *culture* and *society*, where the former means *values* (i.e. norms, beliefs and ideas) and the latter means *patterns of social interaction*. The cultural system contains the most general and abstract values of a society (e.g. a belief in God or democracy). From these values are derived more concrete *norms*, which guide interactions in the social system. The relation between cultural and social systems is therefore characterized by the former guiding the latter.

Moreover, the cultural system patterns the *personality system*, that is, the ways in which people in a society think and feel. Echoing Weber as much as Durkheim, Parsons argues that it is culture that motivates people to act, by constructing their ideas as to what they want and how to get it. From this viewpoint, it is 'the structure of cultural meanings [that] constitutes the "ground" of any system of action' (Parsons, 1961: 963). In other words, it is values, rather than the 'material' factors emphasized by Marx, that drive action. Overall, Parsons is arguing for a sociology which treats cultural values as the primary basis of any society. How any society works is absolutely dependent on a cultural context characterized by *value consensus*: all (or at least most) people in the same society must share the same values and act in regular ways on the basis of them. In this way social order is maintained over time. One of the usual criticisms of this position, obviously enough, is that it seems to make actors out to be 'cultural dopes', obeying the 'instructions' of culture in somewhat automatic ways (Wrong, 1980 [1961]). As a result, claim some critics, Parsons sets up the polar opposite of Marx's alleged economic determinism, namely a *cultural* determinism. In this sense, it is often argued that the Durkheimian focus on a commonly shared culture smothers out both individual scope for action and the conflicts which Marxist and Weberian sociologies emphasize as being at the heart of social life (Dahrendorf, 1959).

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine some of the debates that characterized sociological approaches to culture in the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries. Classical sociologies of culture sought to explicate the relations between 'culture' on the one hand and 'society' (and politics and economics) on the other. Some forms of classical sociology tried to think through the relations between 'culture' and 'nature', while others ignored it completely. A particular source of contention was whether to adopt a more 'materialist' or 'idealist' approach, or whether to combine the two in some kind of attempted synthesis. The early sociologists also often attempted to diagnose the social ills of modernity by identifying the cultural dilemmas of such a society.

Classical sociology's responses to cultural matters cannot be seen as a set of eternal truths. In fact, most of the classical sociologists were primarily concerned to expose the apparent flaws in the ideas of their adversaries. But the classical sociologists can be seen as asking important questions about the nature of culture and how it relates to society. The various types of sociology of culture we have examined, whether they are more influenced by Enlightenment or Romanticist ways of thinking, are all open to criticism and contestation. But they do provide ways of thinking about culture and society that have inspired later generations of sociological thinkers. Throughout this book, the voices of the classical sociologists will sometimes be heard loud and clear, and sometimes only as dim echoes. But in each and every way of looking sociologically at culture that we will examine, the legacy of the pioneers is evident.